



# Together, Close, Resilient: Essays On Emotion Work Among Black Couples

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Together, Close, Resilient: Essays On Emotion Work Among Black Couples

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Department of Sociology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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Together, Close, Resilient: Essays on Emotion Work Among Black Couples

Abstract

Emotional intimacy and support are deemed vital to most individuals' sense of relationship quality and satisfaction. Although relationship outcomes are more closely tied with partners' sense of emotional well-being in their partnerships, most sociological inquiry focuses on how couples navigate instrumental tasks of family work (e.g. household work, childcare, etc.). Examinations of emotional facets of couple relationship remain rare. This dissertation addresses this dearth by presenting an inductively derived analysis of how black heterosexual spouses in enduring relationships (10-40 years) sustain emotional connection. It draws on 75 semi-structured interviews - with relationship professionals (n=12) and 42 black spouses (21 couples) interviewed jointly and individually (n=63) from New York, Cleveland, and Chicago. Using a sociology of emotion lens, it extends Arlie Hochschild's conceptual framework of emotion management by examining emotion work along four dimensions. First, challenging gender essentialism in extant research, it examines partners' desires for, perceptions of and approaches to intimacy going beyond a discussion of gender differences to also shed light on overlap between and variation within gender groups. Secondly, it shows how the co-creation of joint emotion strategies to avoid or confront recurrent interpersonal tensions helped couples solidify a shared sense of couple identity marked by different

degrees of we-ness. Third, contrary to previous studies suggesting it's mainly women who do emotion work on themselves to manage dissatisfaction with intimacy, I reveal how both spouses engage in emotion work when connection breaks down. Often, such emotion work often arises due to tensions between the carework of intimacy and pre-existing norms and beliefs around emotional engagement. Finally, probing particularities in black women's socialization around resilience, I disturb the monolithic portrait of women as intimacy experts in extant research, underlining challenges they face beyond dissatisfaction with male emotionality. By focusing on black couples, the study expands the demographic terrain of qualitative sociological inquiry on emotion work and couple relationships writ large. Finally, by theorizing from the experience of black couples, I disturb trends of taking educated, white, middle class couples as the normative American family, revealing how our conceptualization of emotion work could benefit from better accounting of social positionality.

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*Love is a battle; love is a war; love is a growing up. ~James Baldwin*  
*For J.L.B. and B.A. W.*

## Front Matter: Acknowledgements

*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for,  
the evidence of things not seen. ~ Hebrews 11:1-2, KJV*

*There are years that ask questions and years that answer  
~Zora Neale Hurston*

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more than respond to what I asked; they anticipated what was at the heart of what I really sought to know, leading me to the questions that anchored this study: How do we make our relationships loving, fulfilling, supportive, intimate? How do we create relationships that are deeply intimate? How do folks create the kind of relationships that you aren't just unwilling to leave, but that even in the most difficult of times, you would not want to live *without*? These couples weren't paid – they volunteered their time, and welcomed me in their homes and lives. They sat down with me, sometimes taking hours of their time. I have tried, in this work, to honor the precious treasure with which they entrusted me.

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you are apt to tell Grandma, whenever she corrects you about family ties, trying to straighten out whether I'm your auntie or mother, and *you* let her know none of those titles matter because, "She's my, Jo!" Why yes indeed, Dearheart, I am. You have made me a better and braver me.

To anyone who I've failed to name, please charge it my head and not my heart – I am deeply grateful for every hand that has helped usher me through this journey.

## Motivation

I was given Sara Lawrence Lightfoot's *Respect* (1997) my senior year at MIT by Dr. Clarence Williams, my mentor and undergraduate advisor at MIT. He was profoundly touched by the handling of lives – and tenets – Lightfoot identified in respect. Moving, evocative, weighty and full, overflowing, with wisdom; it left an indelible imprint on me. A writer first, I've always had a tenuous relationship with the hat I (often reluctantly) wear as a researcher or social scientist. I've said often, and maintain, if there is any gravity to my observations or my analysis of human relationships, it's because I've spent most of my life hovering in doorways, surveying the dynamics and nuances of the scene, so that I might render them more fully on the page. In reading *Respect*, however, the thought myself as a scholar of social issues, seemed more plausible, I found myself thinking, "Perhaps..." That, I thought, is the kind of work I could do.

The genesis of this study, quite apropos, came in the portraiture class I was blessed to take with Sara Lawrence Lightfoot early in my graduate career. I say blessed with all sincerity – because I think there was a bit of the divine that got me in the course in the first place as a non-HGSE course that's always oversubscribed. I was, at the time disappointed in myself for not giving the course the labor and focus it warranted (parenting a recalcitrant 17-year old always quick to remind you that you're not her parent can have that effect). Her course is probably the reason I didn't drop out of grad school that year in two ways. First, she showed me that social science could and *should* be just as concerned with what works as what doesn't; that the suggestion otherwise diminishes the whole intellectual endeavor. If our goal is to develop great and better knowledge of how the world works and people within it, we must examine all things – all

things. Unasked questions and the suggestion that some questions aren't worth asking, dim the light of our quest for enlightenment. Second, it offered the promise that there were other, and for me, better ways to wrestle with social issues, to keep sight of the complexity, nuance and contours of those within them – to render the lived experience, the human experience – is definitely what enabled me to continue, gave me the courage to *choose* to press forward and stay.

I hope, finally, that I have begun to do my work well.

\*

*In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart. She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that they only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.*  
~Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

## Chapter 1: Understanding couples' emotion work

*"If you have the courage and the fortitude to be honest with each other then I think that's one of the best things you can have," Aaron responds to my question of what it takes to make a good marriage, "In the event that you can't manage that, I think generosity is the thing that needs to be present, you need to be able to be generous toward the other person all the time... Honesty can be too hard sometimes, period." Detailing the need for fidelity, shared responsibilities and continued work, his wife Joy concludes, "Finally, you have to be willing to be naked in front of the other person and I don't mean [just] physically, and emotionally and your soul. You have to be willing to bare your soul [long pause]. You have to be willing to make love with the lights on but also to live with the lights on and I think [pause] that can be really hard."*

*Listening to Joy's response Aaron sits seemingly uneasy eventually adds, "I'm convinced ... to achieve some of the things that Joy said, it requires a certain kind of awareness in a person, a certain kind of self-reflection and a certain kind of honesty with yourself. And I think that's a very hard thing to do for most people. ... I think you can have aspects, if you can't get to it, you have to, I think, be willing to give in and let it go and not need to be right all the time and not need to control things all the time". ~ Joy and Aaron, married 34 years*

Speaking with black couples who have been together for a decade or more about their relationships and what was most important for sustaining their relationships, partners repeatedly emphasized actions like learning to compromise, communicating clearly, spending time together, sustaining their friendship and remaining attentive to each other's needs. At the heart of all these practices was one overarching piece of advice: stay connected to your partner. Cultivating connection, while highly valued, was also described as one of the most challenging tasks of the relationship. For these largely dual earner couples, part of the challenge was practical; the hustle and bustle of hectic lives didn't make connecting easy. Warning of how quickly couples could become distanced Jolene, married 15 years, stressed the need to be vigilant, "I think most important work is just back to the whole don't let the schedules rule you and just making sure that we're spending time... relationships, to make them work, you have to be really deliberate...

especially with the kids and the schedule and the chaos”. Yet, just as navigating the “time bind” (Hochschild 1989) in their relationships required deliberate effort for these dual-earner couples, Joy and Aaron’s reflections underline how cultivating connection also required *emotional* work.

Individuals come to their intimate partnerships bringing varied desires for intimacy, interdependence and connection. So too, they bring different perceptions, rules and strategies for the best way to navigate feelings in their attempts to realize those desires: which feelings are acceptable to express and under what circumstances; what personal sentiments can and *should* be disclosed; when it’s appropriate to request help or depend on another; and the right way to respond to others’ feelings. Some ways of managing feelings coincide with their partners,’ while others conflict. Moreover, individuals’ habits and orientation towards managing feelings in the process of cultivating a shared life can raise tension not only *between* partners, but also *within* each person. What my analysis reveals is that the key to understanding individuals’ sense of connectedness was unearthing how partners *did* and thought they *should* manage those arising tensions – with their partners and within themselves.

\*

*Are there emotional strategies that prepare the ground for the behavioral strategies men and women pursue [in their relationships] ... If so, what are they? What are the emotional consequences of each? -Hochschild (2003:127).*

Taking Hochschild’s observation that individuals’ emotional strategies shape how they do relationships as a springboard, this study explores some of the individual and joint emotion strategies that shape partners’ sense of connectedness. Drawing on 12 interviewsw with relationship professionals and 63 interviews with 42 black men and

women (comprising 21 couples) in relationships lasting 10 to 40 years,<sup>1</sup> I present an inductively derived analysis of the kinds of emotional strategies partners' use, what informs these strategies and their varied consequences for couples' bond. Broadly speaking, I ask: What work must partners do, jointly and individually, to stay connected? What sociocultural norms and life lessons inform the emotional work they believe they *should* do and how? Do the kind of strategies they employ shape their sense of connectedness and if so, how?

In my dissertation, I examine these questions through the lens of the sociology of emotions, drawing on the theoretical framework of emotion management elaborated by sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1979; 2003). In the broadest sense, we can think of emotion management as “the act of evoking or shaping, as well as suppressing feeling,” to engage with social norms as we navigate our interactions (Hochschild 2003: 95). A sociology of emotion perspective offers important tools for thinking about what informs how people go about the “doing” of intimate relationships, where managing how we feel and the way we express it is of critical importance. Using the emotion management framework, the study enhances our knowledge of how some partners understand, assess and engage connection in their intimate relationships, while contributing to the conceptual extension and refinement of this framework.

In the discussion that follows, I provide an overview of previous research that sets the backdrop for this study. I begin by detailing the social significance of understanding couples' connection, before offering a review of significant extant empirical studies in

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<sup>1</sup> Forty-eight men and women (24 couples) were actually interviewed for the study. However, three couples subsequently requested that their information from their interviews be excluded from publication. Due to the iterative nature of my analysis, while not quoted or included in tables on couples' demographics, their accounts contributed to many of the concepts and insights I developed in this study.



this area. Then I turn to a discussion of the conceptual approach employed in my analysis. Finally, I provide a brief outline of the chapters in the dissertation.

*The significance of couples' bond: Sketching the relational terrain*

Research suggests that partners deem emotional intimacy, care and support vital ingredients to the health, stability and satisfaction of their relationships (Whyte 1990; Sayer and Bianchi 2000; Gottman 1994; Karney and Bradbury 1995). Despite the fact that most people cite challenges with emotional lives as reasons for divorce and that relationship outcomes are more correlated with emotional than instrumental tasks, most sociological inquiry focuses on how men and women navigate instrumental tasks of family work (e.g. division of household work, childcare, etc.). How couples bond and negotiate the emotional dimensions of their relationship are issues that merit further consideration for a few reasons.

First, understanding how couples engage in their intimate lives grants us one window into how we might understand social and cultural change (Coontz 1997, 2005). While expectations of affection and emotional support have long been hallmarks in marriage, recent scholarship suggests shifting norms and conditions have led contemporary couples to place greater primacy on emotional fulfillment and satisfaction in their relationships (Skolnick 2002; Prager 1995, 2000). Bellah et al. (2008 [1985]) argue, “The habits and modes of thought that govern intimate relationships are thus one of the central places where we may come to understand the cultural legacy with which we face the challenge of contemporary social life” (108). Barich and Bielby (1996) found that students’ expectations for companionship, personality development and emotional security, increased between 1967 and 1994, as expectations for healthy and happy children, moral

and religious unity and maintenance of a home diminished. Arlene Skolnick (2002) contends “[T]he emotional quality of the couple relationship has also become increasingly important as the principal reason for staying together... by the 1970s, people had become more psychologically oriented, reportedly seeking emotional warmth and intimacy in marriage” (150). The persistent feeling that their relationships *should* be close, intimate, and interdependent can heap added stress on relationships. Illouz (2008) suggests the proliferation of romantic discourses and growing commercialization of love in consumer culture makes it hyper-emotionalized, yielding oversized expectations of love as “salvation”. Given these expectations, marital conflict can often emerge around issues of emotional investment and communication (Duncombe and Marsden 1993, 1995).

Secondly, recent studies find that marital outcomes are highly correlated with the emotional dimensions of couples’ lives. In a survey study of 459 ever-married wives, Whyte (1990) found that individual premarital traits and couples’ socio-demographic factors had only marginally significant impacts on outcomes. Instead, marital success was more strongly correlated with intra-couple dynamics: a high degree of companionship between spouses, a merging of identity and resources, shared values and leisure pursuits, and mutual intimacy (Whyte 1990: 201-202; See also Clarkwest 2006). More recently, Wilcox and Nock’s (2006) analysis of the National Survey of Families and Households revealed that men’s emotion work was the most significant determinant of women’s marital quality - more important than divisions of household labor, female labor force participation, childbearing, or education. The authors conclude, “the functions, character,

and stability of contemporary marriages are intimately tied to their emotional well-being” (1340).<sup>2</sup>

Finally, understanding the emotional work men and women do to maintain their relationships is significant because it may also be the most ongoing form of family work in couples’ relationships - continuing from courtship through varied life stages as partners’ have, raise and send off children as negotiate careers and go into retirement. Moreover, unlike other forms of family work couples manage, it can’t be pardoned off to others. Couples’ closeness and intimacy is predicated on how *each* partner personally demonstrates feelings and care in the relationship (Strazdins and Broom 2004).

Scholars who advocate greater examination of the emotional dimensions of couples’ lives trace sociological inattention of this area to a few factors. Noting the saliency of cultural perceptions that intimacy is idiosyncratic, personal, and unique, Erickson (2011) attributes the dearth of research in this area to discomfort with the idea that “husbands and wives may have to work at caring and intimacy contradicts what many wish to believe about love and marriage” (63; See also Jackson 1993).<sup>3</sup> On another front, DeVault (1991) suggests that scant examination of couple’s emotional support and care is linked to the devaluation of this work due to its association with women, given taken for granted notions and cultural assumptions about feminine inclinations and the naturalness of care (See also Daniels 1987).

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<sup>2</sup> Other studies echo these findings, pointing to the significance of interpersonal dynamics, including partners’ ability to: regulate negative affect (Gottman 1994), affirm their love (Veroff, Douvan and Hatchett 1995), and spend time together and confide in one another (Canary and Stafford 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Recalling the reaction to her study of Americans’ understandings of love, Ann Swidler (2001) notes, “When I began this research, many academic colleagues greeted the topic with embarrassment or laughter – leave love to lovers; you can’t study love. Sociologists investigate marriage and family life, but love has seemed too personal, too mysterious, and I would argue too sacred for serious sociological study” (1-2).

Empirical research on how men and women interpret, experience and engage in the intimate, emotional facets of their relationship remains fairly rare in sociology.

Nevertheless, a small body of empirical research has taken up the charge to examine these issues. I offer a brief overview of key studies below.

### *Gender and emotional asymmetry*

Alternately conceptualized as *practices of intimacy* (Jamieson 2011), *love labor* (Lynch 2007), and *emotional carework* (Erickson 2011), Erickson describes this carework as “activities that are concerned with the enhancement of others’ emotional well-being and with the provision of emotional support,” all of which require time, effort, and skill (1993; 2005).<sup>1</sup> Consistent with sociological research on other dimensions of couples’ relationships, much of the empirical research in this area takes gender as the primary analytical lens for understanding how partners engage and make sense of closeness and intimacy, particularly how partners go about “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987). The empirical concentration on gender is unsurprising given our understanding of the pervasiveness of gender in our lives (Chodorow 1978; Lorber 1994). Gender encompasses individuals, embedding them in social contexts where structural and symbolic conditions that draw distinctions between women and men in everyday activities (Ferree 1990). With few exceptions, extant research on carework in couples’ relationships has focused on issues of “emotional asymmetry” and difference between men and women’s desires, expectations and experiences in marriage (Duncombe and Marsden 1998). Examinations of these asymmetries tend to fall along three lines.

Before continuing, it is worth noting that one of the challenges in existing research has been the rather amorphous use of the term in “emotion work” – applying it both to efforts

of *interpersonal* care and support as well as to *individual* efforts to manage one's own feelings (Duncombe and Marsden 1998). To elide that confusion, in the discussion that follows and throughout the dissertation, I draw on Erickson's term "carework" (2011) to refer to interpersonal acts of emotional care, while using "emotion work" to refer to Hochschild's (1979; 1983) original definition of individuals' acts of emotion management performed on one's self.

Building on sociologist Arlie Hochschild's classic study, *The Second Shift* (1989), the first body of research highlights an asymmetry in how much women and men contribute to managing carework in their relationships. These studies underline how women tend to take greater responsibility for managing carework in relationships (Hochschild 1989; Erickson 2005; Strazdins and Broom 2004), and are held accountable for it in ways that men are not (Daniels 1987). Echoing Duncombe and Marsden's (1993) characterization of carework as the "neglected aspect" of family work (1993), much of the empirical research in this tradition has focused largely on how imbalances in the comparative contribution of men and women to carework undermines couples' closeness and satisfaction (Erickson 1993, 2005; Wilcox and Nock 2006). In this research, the emphasis is clearly on the *work* of carework and *labor* in love labor as Strazdins and Broom (2004) underline:

In families, time and effort is required to meet other people's emotional needs, improve their well-being, and maintain harmony... Taking the time to listen to another's problems or worries, giving advice or guidance, taking the load off a partner, and showing warmth and appreciation are all... time consuming, can be demanding, involves opportunity costs, and is often invisible, unacknowledged, or devalued (357).

Thompson and Walker's (1989) review of literature on couple relationships revealed that women did more management and work to sustain intimacy in relationships, offering

physical affection when something nice happened, working to present a more positive image (e.g. smiling and laughing more), and communicating more. Scholars have pointed out, however, that women were at times complicit in marginalizing the significance of caring work. Due to lingering assumptions that such care is a “natural” or “spontaneous” expression of care, the illusion of effortlessness is part of doing the work well (Hochschild 1983; DeVault 1991). Seen through this lens, tensions in couples’ relationships reflect inequities in the division of labor in emotional dimensions of their relationships.

The second asymmetry that figures prominently in the literature revolved around gender differences in desires for and expectations of closeness as well as the value given to intimacy. More specifically, a central theme in this research is that men and women often seek different, and sometimes incompatible, goals when they marry. Mansfield and Collard (1988), for instance, found that, “Most (though not all) men seek a life in common with their wives, a home life, a physical and psychological base; somewhere to set out ... [while] wives desired ‘a common life with an empathetic partner’ ... a close exchange of intimacy which would make them feel valued as a person not just a wife” (88). Citing the increasing importance of emotional expression in many modern heterosexual couple relationships (Cancian 1987; Giddens 1992), Marsden and Duncombe’s study of 60 couples (1995) found that women tended to complain of their male partners’ inability or unwillingness to express intimate emotion - to ‘be there’ emotionally or to ‘do intimacy’. In a similar fashion, Rubin’s *Intimate Strangers* (1983) sheds light on how personal and interpersonal tensions arise in marriage due to the emotionally inexpressive man and the emotionally dissatisfied woman. She argues that

despite attempts to change interpersonal dynamics and how they relate in terms of gender, couples often struggle to break out of traditional roles. Studies have also emphasized how men's preoccupation with work and careers can cause them to minimize the significance of couple time (Schulz 2011) and to deprive female partners of desired intimacy and togetherness (Gerstel and Gross 1984). As a result of their greater desire for intimacy, qualitative studies tend to highlight how women do "emotion work" on themselves to remain engaged in the relationship in spite of dissatisfaction with intimacy and closeness (Schulz 2011; Mansfield and Collard 1988; Duncombe and Marden 1993, 1995).

Finally, the literature emphasizes how partners interpret differences in the practice of intimacy in relationships in highly gender contingent ways (Reissman 1990). Duncombe and Marsden (1995) found that men interpreted wives as being naturally better at intimacy, and as a result, perceived women's requests for mutuality and greater emotional involvement to be either irrational or "whingeing". In this research, these differences in perspectives are often associated with characterizations that suggest men and women hold different skills in emotional engagement in their intimate relationships. Women are framed as being more adept at fostering intimacy and communicating emotions, while men are characterized as resistant to and struggling with sharing their feelings. Men's inexpressiveness, in particular, has been echoed across multiple disciplines characterized as their "trained incapacity to share" (Komarovsky 1962), psychodynamic theories highlighting men's deep-seeded fear of intimacy (Chodorow 1978), and feminist criticisms of men's emotional distance in relationships (Hite 1987; Steinem 1991).

Overall in this research, women are portrayed as being more concerned about emotional connection, with greater desires for cultivating emotional intimacy and understanding through disclosure of feelings. Men, by contrast, can be depicted as emotionally hollow wanting independence, sex, and non-disclosure of feelings in their relationships.

Among the few exceptions to studies of asymmetry are a few studies on gender role convergence and the transformation of intimacy. This research finds spouses demonstrating a range of roles in relationships, which may or may not be gender differentiated (Wallerstein 1995). Cancian's (1987) conceptualization of family blueprints for intimacy (e.g. traditional, individual and interdependent), for example, contends that new relationship models emerged as a reflection of late modernity (See also Giddens 1992)<sup>4</sup>. Describing the interdependent blueprint of marriage as having more "androgynous" gender roles as well as high levels of disclosure and intimacy, she notes how these relationships are marked by, "fairly equal interdependence, instead of reverting to the roles of dependent woman and independent man; they encourage each other in diverse experiences and ways of relating" (149-150). Similarly, Schwartz's (1994) conceptualization of "peer marriage" suggests women and men can share desires for emotional engagement and are capable of sharing emotional responsibility for the relationship. Seen through this lens, the intimacy, interdependence and closeness partners experience is a reflection of their adoption of more androgynous or egalitarian gender roles, where they share overlapping responsibilities for care.

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<sup>4</sup> Giddens' (1992) theorizing of new requirements for mutual self-disclosure is in his notions of pure relationships and the transformation of intimacy is more widely known, yet Cancian's work (1987) on family blueprints, predates it and offers a more nuanced and empirically based conceptualization of interdependent relationships.



Other researchers, however, challenge the caricatured portrait of men and women offered in studies of carework, highlighting how the preoccupation with difference can work to reify and re-inscribe traditional gender stereotypes and norms (Ferree 1990; Gerson 1985, 2010). Benjamin and Sullivan (1996), for example, have criticized Duncombe and Marsden's (1993, 1995) studies for adopting the dynamic conceptualization of "doing gender" which is predicated on multiple gender performances (West and Zimmerman 1987), but using the concept in a manner that reinforces "an overly static conception of dichotomised gendered conduct" (230). On another front, Christensen and Heavey (1990) show that while the frequency of emotional patterns of withdrawal and demand vary for men and women, the role either takes in a given interaction is determined more by that person's goals than their gender. Similarly, comparing men and women's definitions and preference for intimate interactions, Reis, Senchak and Solomon (1985) found that "males are capable of interacting as intimately as females when the situation makes it desirable to do so...[however] males are relatively more likely to choose not to interact intimately....despite an equivalent capacity for intimacy" (1215-16).<sup>5</sup>

There are also some critical limitations to research that focuses on gender role convergence. Studies emphasizing the relationship between the achievement of connection and egalitarian gender roles can sometimes border on implying a causal relationship whereby gender equity leads to cultivating connected relationships (Schwartz and Scott 2003). For instance, Schwartz (1994) suggests it's the "reshuffling of

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<sup>5</sup> Other research suggests similarity in emotional expression. Mills et al. (1989) meta-analysis of research on empathy, for example, found that women and men experience empathic feelings to the same degree; yet they may express and display those feelings differently. Risman (1987) revealed that when put in situations that require it (e.g. single fatherhood, caretaking of a parent), men employ "mothering behaviors".

traditional gender relations” into a more egalitarian arrangement that drives “deep and true partnership based on equality, equity and intimacy” (3). Yet, previous research reveals many traditional couples evaluate their relationships as deeply intimate and connected (Wallerstein 1995). Moreover, even when couples establish fairly egalitarian relationships, they can still struggle with connection (Rubin 1991). The challenge in this work is that it can frame dynamic processes like cultivating intimacy and interdependence as static qualities, failing to fully account for variation not only across couple types, but also within. Still, while it has its flaws, this research does offer a more diverse portrait of gender roles than that depicted in studies on carework.

Finally, in the research examining how couples organize responsibility for carework in their relationships, the accent on quantifying and comparing men and women’s contributions obscures Hochschild’s (1989) larger insight: spouses’ satisfaction cannot be fully understood simply by evaluating objective differences in the division of labor (e.g. time spent or number of tasks performed). Rather, perceptions of marital quality rested on how they *felt* about marital arrangements and *managed* those feelings. In a sense, by placing the accent on *work* in carework instead of the *care*, focusing on the inequities of *labor* in love labor instead of the *love*, this research loses sight on the Hochschild’s reminder to “keep an eye on emotion,” (1989, 2003) probing not only emotional tasks, but also feelings about them.

Highlighting how cultural discourse and social structures can motivate the tendency to construct gender through “dichotomous distinctions,” several scholars have underlined the dangers of presuming gender differentiation (Barnett and Rivers 2004). When we follow the inclination to seek out and emphasize differences uncritically, we risk glossing

over and minimizing the significance of similarity and overlap between genders (Fuchs Epstein 2006, 1999; Lorber 1994). Although recent research suggests younger generations may reflect greater overlap and convergence in their views (Barnett and Rivers 2004; Cameron 2007), research examining couples' relationships remains beset with the same tendency to focus on cross-gender comparisons (Schulz 2011; Ortiz 2011). Ultimately, the preoccupation with illuminating gender *differences*, with little consideration for variation within gender group or overlap between genders, has left critical gaps in our understanding of complexity and variation in the emotional dimensions of couples' lives.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, despite a burgeoning of research on the emotional dimensions of couples' lives in the late 1980s to mid-1990s, there have been very few studies, particularly in-depth qualitative studies in the interim. As a result there are a number of outstanding questions about how intimate relationships have developed over the last twenty years.

### *Challenges of concentrating on gender: methodological reflections*

The challenge in grounded theory is that it can take you in a very different direction than you anticipated (Brown 2006). But we're charged with following where the data leads, rather than imposing a lens or interpretation *onto* the data. As how partners' experience, negotiate, and interpret emotional connection in their lives emerged as a central theme in the analysis, I surveyed literature on couples as I tried to make sense of my data. I found that the centrality of gender in all these studies failed to resonate with

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<sup>6</sup> Hochschild (1983) herself admits that in the aim of distinguishing the sociology of emotions as separate from other disciplinary account of emotions (e.g. psychodynamic or biological), she placed greater emphasis on contrasts between men and women's emotional behavior, to the neglect of differences within each gender (201–23).

my participants' experiences - much to my surprise. Indeed, a central feature of my research proposal was my intuition "that individuals may be immersed in *multiple* gender cultures (e.g. peer, religious, and familial) that provide distinct, and sometimes conflicting, norms about appropriate gender behaviors that individuals must negotiate and navigate". Despite what the literature suggested, and what *I* expected, the patterns I saw just weren't sufficiently captured by frames centered on gender – whether underling persistent gender asymmetry or evolutions towards greater convergence.

Trying to understand the feelings and tensions men and women faced as they negotiated emotional connection in their lives, I further refined my questions. How does emotional intimacy fit into modern marriage? What work must partners do, jointly and individually, to stay connected? What sociocultural norms and life lessons inform the emotional work they believe they *should* do and how? Do the kind of strategies they employ shape their sense of connectedness and if so, how?

Ironically, in much the same way that assumptions about men and women are so deeply embedded in our everyday lives that they are often taken for granted as "natural" (Lorber 1994; Epstein 2006), there is a presumption of the "natural" centrality of gender in much of the research on heterosexual relationships. In it, gender has come to occupy something of a master status position (Hughes 1971). Certainly, gender matters. Yet, rather than assuming difference, I found I needed to ask instead if, when and how it mattered to varied situations (Shields 2002; 2000). Ultimately, it was only when I unseated gender as the primary explanatory lens that the meaning of the gender patterns I had found began to make sense and come into focus.

Approaching the literature with new eyes, I realized that many of the concepts and categories that I'd developed from my data spoke to individuals' practices, beliefs and challenges about coping with feelings – both their partner's and their own - that is, emotion management. What became clear was that I needed to engage with the literature less in terms of the empirical insights it offered into gender, and more for its conceptual insights as a framework in the sociology of emotions.

*Emotion work – a (unexpectedly) non-gender centric framework*

*The “social” goes far deeper than our current images of self lead us to suppose. Social roles and relations do not simply reflect patterns of thought and action, leaving the realm of emotion and feeling untouched, timeless and universal. No, there are social patterns to feeling itself. Our task, as sociologists, is to invent both a magnifying glass and a pair of binoculars that permit us to trace the many links between a world that shapes people's feeling and people who can feel. ~ Hochschild “The Capacity to Feel” (2003: 86)*

At its core, Hochschild's research on couples (1983, 1989, 2003) illustrates how taking a sociology of emotion lens brings unique insight to our understanding of couples' intimate lives. Questions of how we know what is appropriate to feel in varied situations, what are acceptable ways of displaying those feelings, and how we manage feelings to bring them in line with social norms are all socially structured phenomenon as Garey and Hansen (2011) describe:

The sociology of emotions focuses on what people feel, how they make sense of their feelings, how their feelings affect their actions, how they manage their feelings and how they display the appropriate feelings in given situations (Hochschild 1975b). Other approaches, such as the psychological or biological study of emotions, focus on the individual or the physiological rather than on cultural norms and the social construction of emotion. A *sociological* approach to the study of emotion looks beneath the surface appearance of emotion to focus on the way emotions are culturally constructed and shaped by social norms (5).

A sociology of emotion approach helps shed light on the factors that influence how people go about the “doing” of emotions, probing influences like: family socialization, religious traditions, sociocultural norms and situational context. While concepts like the “second shift” and “time bind” and “economy of gratitude,” are common knowledge in sociology, the broader theoretical framework of emotion management is less widely known. Consequently, appreciating the conceptual purchase of this approach first requires understanding the central facets of the emotion management framework. I briefly describe a few central tenets relevant to my study below.

At the center of this framework are *feeling rules* or *emotion norms* (Hochschild 1979), which refer to sociocultural guidelines that prescribe what constitutes “appropriate” ways of feeling, displaying or expressing particular emotions in varied situations. Hochschild describes feeling rules as allowing individuals to take “our stance toward emotional experience... Some feelings in the ongoing stream of emotional life we gladly acknowledge, welcome, foster. Others we grudgingly acknowledge, and still others the culture invites us to completely deny” (2003: 122). Underlying these stances are cultural norms about emotions, not only in terms of appropriate *displays* of emotion, but also what’s appropriate *to feel* in different situations (e.g. sadness at a funeral but not humor) and for different groups (e.g. mothers should feel affection and love but not antipathy for their children or expectations men should not show or feel fear). Women who never cry, a bride sobbing and incapable of feeling happy on her wedding day, or laughter at a funeral – all of these are deviations from cultural expectations of appropriate engagement with sadness. Making a similar point, Illouz (2008) highlights how even the

psychological categories through which we makes sense of our personal experiences are *social* rather than private or singular, thus she notes:

An experience is always contained and organized by institutions (a sick person in a hospital; an unruly teenager in a school; an angry woman in a family, etc.); and experiences have shapes, intensities, textures, which emanate from the way in which institutions structure emotional life... to be intelligible to oneself and to others, an experience must follow established cultural patterns. A sick person may explain his disease as God's punishment for his past misdeeds, as a biological accident, or as caused by an unconscious death wish; all of these interpretations emerge from and are situated within elaborate explanatory models used and recognizable by historically situated groups of people (Kindle position 413-419).

According to Hochschild, when people deviate from normative feelings or expressions, they are typically driven to bring their feelings or expressions back into line with cultural standards (1985; Hochschild 1979).<sup>7</sup> In order to do so, they engage in what Hochschild defines as *emotion management* - the process of invoking or suppressing emotions in order to conform to emotion norms. Hochschild distinguishes between emotion management done in our private lives, which she calls *emotion work* and *emotional labor*, which is done in the public sphere, particularly in the workplace. Thoits (1990) offers a typology of emotion management that details two modes for altering an emotional experience: behavioral strategies for acting or avoiding some aspect of the emotional experience and cognitive strategies like “framing” enable people to re-interpret an emotion or the cultural meaning of a situation and/or the emotions it evokes. Individuals bring multiple interpretative “frames” they can use to ascribe meaning to experiences and interactions their relationships (Goffman 1974; Felmlee and Sprecher 2006). These varied framings can shape how partners interact with their significant

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<sup>7</sup> While Hochschild emphasizes how emotion management explains why people feel or express emotions in socially prescribed ways (i.e. conformity), just as with other normative scripts, individuals can engage with emotions norms in varied ways, ranging from resisting and ignoring to conforming (Gerson 2002).

others. For instance, a man with a fluid notion of masculinity may feel more comfortable revealing fears about losing his job to his wife, than one who embraces more traditional masculinity, who might hold mask his feelings with stoic silence. The situation is the same in both instances – communicating with wives about losing a job – but differences in their interpretative framings can result in different pathways of feelings and actions.

While the emotion management framework can illuminate some elements of couples' intimate relationships, it also contains some conceptual limitations that can obscure important facets of those relationships. In particular, the intersection of constructivist and functionalist thinking underlying the symbolic interaction approach at the heart of this framework presents some challenges.

On one front, the functionalist leaning in this framework reveals a certain conservatism in the presumed purpose of emotion work, which is depicted mainly as fostering conformity to maximize social order. While this perspective is quite helpful for explaining how people feel or express emotions in socially prescribed ways, it does not easily lend itself to understanding change, non-conformity or resistance. Other scholars have emphasized how individuals can engage with emotion norms in varied ways, ranging from resisting and ignoring to conforming (Gerson 2002; Cooper 2014). On another front, the emphasis on conflict in the framework helps illuminate how people deal with tensions and difference in their relationships, but offers much less insight into how they cultivate consensus. As the discussion on gender asymmetry above illustrates, research in this area can almost give the impression that intimate relationships are largely battlegrounds for gender conflict. To that end, very little research has examined the emotion work that goes into negotiating two individuals' varied perspectives to develop



mutual understanding, which we know is a key process in cultivating a shared life and couple identity (Berger and Kellner 1964). Moreover, the focus on conflict can also obscure the mutual development of *care* in couples' lives. As Hirsch and Wardlow (2006) highlight, "to think about couples only in terms of power ... is to miss the fact that men and women may also care for conjugal partners with whom they are simultaneously involved in daily battle over bodies, power and resources" (3). Where, we might ask, is the common ground? Or more precisely, how do partners find and cultivate that terrain?

Surveying the emotion management literature equipped with a sense of general patterns in the practices and norms that informed connection in couples' relationships, I found a few issues in the literature that were not well attended to and that seemed to merit further attention: understanding the emotion work that goes into cultivating a shared sense of couple identity; illuminating challenges partners face in cultivating intimacy and the individual emotion work women and men do to manage them; and understanding the challenges women face in cultivating intimacy beyond dissatisfaction with their partner's emotional engagement. These issues form the backbone of my study, thus I devote a chapter to each.

### *The study*

In the study, I report the results of analysis of 63 in-depth interviews<sup>8</sup> with 42 black men and women (comprising 21 couples) in enduring unions from three metropolitan areas: New York, Cleveland, and Chicago. The men and women in these couples were between the ages of 33 and 75 (mean 49.9). Married between 10 and 40 years, the sample had an average length of marriage of 23.6 years. Using education as a proxy for class, in

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<sup>8</sup> Partners were interviewed together as well as individually, yielding three interviews per couples.

2/3 of the couples at least one partner had a college degree and in 1/3 of the couples neither partner had a college degree. I discuss couples' demographics in greater detail in the following chapter. In addition to interviewing the couples, I also draw on 12 interviews from a variety of relationship professionals (i.e. marriage and family therapists, social workers, relationship coaches, etc.).

The study was designed to focus on black couples given how little is known about how they understand and experience their intimate relationships. On one hand, examinations of black gender relations have largely been preoccupied with the black marriage market and structure of black families, eclipsing concerns about the experience of black couples in stable relationships (Chaney and Marsh 2009; Marks et al 2008; Burton and Tucker 2009). In their extensive cross-disciplinary review of research on black couples, Helm and Carson (2013) found that while an extensive literature on the black family has developed since the Moynihan report (McAdoo 2007; Tucker and Mitchell 1995), "there remains a paucity of literature that focuses on African Americans couples independent of the Black family" (6; But see Patterson 1999). On another front, our limited knowledge around black couples also reflects how their experiences have rarely been explored in the in-depth qualitative research on couples' relationships, which has focused primarily on white middle class couples – like the work on emotion management (Dixon 2009). Underlining the dearth of exploration of black couples' experience in in-depth qualitative sociological research on marriage and family, DeVault (1999) argues that it's based on a conceptual foundation of the "SNAF -the idea of a 'standard North American family'" (Smith 1993), noting:

Researchers routinely design studies that include only married couples with children, only middle-class, white family groups, only families with relatively

minor difficulties. Other household groups are implicitly defined as exceptional, included under the rubric of ‘diversity’... Many researchers note these limitations and, often, promise further research with more diverse groups. Such promises, however, do little to expand the scholarly view of family life (56).

Despite a growing number of qualitative studies on dynamics among white middle class couples, there has not been a corresponding growth in the examination of black couples’ intimate lives – particularly in stable or enduring relationships (Goodwin 2003; Tucker and Crouter 2008; Parker 2000) - a critical shortcoming in sociological research on couples’ intimate lives. By examining how emotion work plays out in some black couples’ relationships, my study provides one step in the direction of remedying this gap.

To my knowledge, there have been no studies that focus explicitly on emotion work within black couples’ relationships. The infrequency of viewing their couple relationships through this lens may reflect a perceived dissonance between their experience and the empirical research the framework is best known for – work/family studies.<sup>9</sup> A number of black scholars have questioned the applicability of the home/work dichotomy given black women’s long history of working outside the home throughout the 19th and 20th centuries (Jones 1985; White 1999). Sociologist Bart Landry’s (2000) sociohistorical analysis of black wives’ history of working outside the home and involvement in public work projects of racial uplift, leads him to question the applicability of the “cult of domesticity” so prominent in (white) feminist analysis to black women (See also Barnes 2008; Hill 2005). Ultimately, he posits there have long been three, not two, spheres structuring their lives: family, career, and community. Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) has argued that proper gender roles of manhood and womanhood may not revolve

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<sup>9</sup> Although an emotion management lens has been widely applied in research in the public sphere (See Wharton 2009 for a comprehensive review), in the private sphere it has been engaged largely to develop gender analyses interrogating the home/work or family/work divide.

around the home/work divide for black men and women, leading her to question the applicability of marital models, gender roles and ideologies (Parker 2005; Roos 2009). The critiques these scholars offer are insightful and important. Nevertheless, if we focus only on the fairly narrow *application* of concepts of emotion management in the private sphere to family/work studies, we can miss the broader *analytical* relevance of the emotion management framework. Concepts like emotion norms, framing strategies and emotion work are uniquely suited to shedding light on how individuals – of any race – assess, practice and make sense of connection in their relationships.

One limitation to the study that bears mention is that focusing on a racially homogenous sample doesn't enable me to make any claims about the racial distinctiveness of the experiences of the men and women in my study. As a result, race only emerges as a central feature in the final chapter. Still, for whatever I sacrifice in the ability to make racial comparisons, there are also gains from taking this approach. In particular, my research helps to spotlight variation among black couples, bringing attention to diversity of perspectives *within* the group. Recently, some scholars have underlined a need for more research of this nature on black couples, underlining how nuances *within* the group may be obscured in racially comparative research (Bryant et al. 2010, Stanik et al 2012). By focusing on black couples, whose relationships have been understudied and under-theorized, my dissertation stands to break new ground expanding the demographic terrain of emotion management research and on qualitative research on couples more broadly. Equally importantly, while black couples are the subject of the study, the concepts developed from my analysis are not race-specific. Rather, the frames I develop to conceptualize how individuals employ emotion strategies

to manage the emotional dimensions of their intimate relationships are germane to our understanding of couple relationships and the sociology of emotion writ large.

### *Layout of chapters*

The study is titled *essays on emotion work* quite purposively because each chapter each chapter can stand alone, offering a self-contained exploration of the emotion work individuals undertake in their intimate relationships along three distinct dimensions. More specifically, I shed light on the individual emotion work participants do on themselves, the interpersonal practices of carework they co-construct and employ with each other, as well as the emotion norms and feeling rules (origins) passed down via socialization shape how we engage in our relationships.

The next two chapters are largely descriptive. In Chapter Two, *Introductions*, I offer an overview of the study, design, methodology and couples. I also offer some methodological reflections on the research journey and describe a few general trends that helped solidify the study's theoretical orientation. In the third chapter, *More than intimate strangers: Partners' perspectives and experiences of closeness*, I offer an overview of assessments and perspectives about connection among the women and men in my sample. With an eye to some of the gaps in extant research on carework, I go beyond a discussion of differences *between* men and women to also shed light on overlap between and variation within gender groups. By examining how women and men in the study perceive, evaluate and understand their closeness, I bring my work into conversation with previous research and debates on emotion management, intimacy, gender, and marriage.

In the fourth chapter, *No Big I's and Little You's: Avoidance, confrontation and the production of we-ness*, I focus on how couples' jointly constructed narratives shed light

on how they cultivate a shared sense of couple identity. Drawing more heavily on an analysis of joint interviews, I explore couples' co-constructed narratives to elucidate their "couple ideal" - and the salience of interdependence within it. I found that two strategies of emotion work, reflecting divergent ways of engaging in marital conversation and negotiation (i.e. shared avoidance vs. confrontation), created different potential for the discursive production of we-ness. In examining these differences, I question dominant cultural assumptions about the necessity of interdependence in intimate relationships, highlighting instead the multiplicity of functional marital arrangements.

In the fifth chapter, *When things fall apart: Emotion work and dilemmas of strained intimacy*, I explore the individual emotion "framing" work partners did to manage dilemmas when closeness between them broke down. I bring the study into conversation with previous studies on the cognitive emotion strategies used to rationalize, justify or challenge dissatisfaction or problematic interactions in relationships. While this research tends to focus on partners' comparative evaluations of intimacy, resulting in analyses that emphasize gender differences, I train my lens on comparing the framing strategies used to reconcile similar dilemmas around disconnection. I found three central types of dilemmas that prompted partners to do emotion work to manage a sense of undermined closeness: dissatisfaction with a significant other's emotional engagement; inability to meet a partner's request for connection due to holding contradictory emotion norms; and failure to live up to one's own standards of emotional engagement. In demonstrating how people do emotion work to manage feelings about their *own* actions or lack thereof, I shed light on how the carework required for intimacy sometimes contradicts pre-existing norms and beliefs around emotional engagement. Looking at strategies across dilemmas, I also

reveal how both women *and* men did emotion work to reconcile making do with ongoing dissatisfaction with closeness, contrary to the depiction in previous studies.

In the sixth and final empirical chapter, *Closeness and cautionary tales: The challenge of resilience*, I interrogate the monolithic portrait of women as intimacy experts in extant research on couples' emotion work. More precisely, I explore how the cautionary tales some women were taught to help them be emotionally resilient sometimes presented barriers to doing the carework intimacy required. Broadly speaking, I ask: How did the emotion norms conveyed in cautionary tales about resilience shape how these women went about developing closeness in their relationships? More precisely, how did emotion norms cautioning against emotional attachment, dependence, and revealing their feelings complicate the carework that goes into cultivating intimacy? What emotion work did they do to counterbalance those lessons? Due to needing to reconcile contradictions between getting close and maintain resilience, I argue that the emotion work that some women must do in support of their relationships was very different from that typically associated with women (e.g. suppressing desires for closeness, managing disappointment with emotional intimacy, etc.). I also bring my work into conversation with previous research on black women's socialization and "survival strategies" (Ladner 1971; Stack 1975; Rose 2003) and recent work on emotion strategies of "doing security" (Cooper 2014) and "flexibility" (Pugh 2015). Reflecting on some particularities in black women's experience, I offer a meditation on how race may matter in our analyses of couples' dynamics and complicate assertions about the newness of America's "new insecurity culture". Ultimately, I suggest that without contextualizing the patterns we observe we might miss how seemingly similar behaviors and beliefs may reflect different relationship

processes.

Finally, in the seventh chapter, *Conclusions – Connecting the ties that bind*, I focus on a few prominent themes that weave their way across chapters, underlining the thematic, conceptual and analytical contributions the study makes to our knowledge on emotion work, couple relationships and sociology at large.



## Chapter 2 - Cultivating Connection: Introducing the study

‘How did you stay married so long?’ I remember looking into the eager young face of a woman who's asked that question one night after one of our performances. I searched my mind, trying to articulate what I really felt about marital longevity besides the usual platitudes – 'Don't go to bed angry,' 'You've just got to keep God in the equation,' or 'Try to remain attractive to each other.'

There comes a point when you discover what love really is. You don't know it beforehand, but eventually you arrive at a point when you can say to the other person in your life, *I want you to be the best person you can be. What is it that fulfills you as a human being? Why are you on this earth?...* I think that's the beginning of love.” [emphasis added]

~Ruby Dee, *With Ossie and Ruby: In this life together*

Under varied guises, when it comes to marriage and intimate relationships, everyone seems to be asking the same question: how do you make it last? Singles are searching for ways to select partners well and avoid pitfalls; young couples want to know how to protect their relationships from becoming a statistic. Couples in turmoil want evidence that it's possible to make it through the rough spots and couples long together want to know if it's possible to keep the fire going. Moreover, ongoing longitudinal studies on marriage (National Marriages, Early Years of Marriage Project) and policy initiatives to cultivate programs to address what popular discourse often frames as a crisis in marriage (e.g. President Bush and President Obama's Healthy Marriage and Relationship Initiatives), suggest the question is just as pressing for scholars and policymakers alike (Brotherson and Duncan 2004).

I began my dissertation research interested in many of the same issues detailed above. Having surveyed the literature on couples' relationships, I was intrigued by the fact that despite most people spending more time maintaining their relationships than entering or exiting them, there's been a dearth of research on how couples maintain relationships

(Dindia and Baxter 1987; Dindia 2000; Parker 2000). As relationship scholar Steven Duck (1988) observed "the huge area where relationships...exist between their initial development and possible decline...a vast unstudied void" (47). My particular interest in understanding how some black couples had made their relationships last, led me to conduct sixty-three in-depth interviews with forty-two black men and women comprising twenty-one couples between 2011 and 2013.<sup>10</sup> Yet, as is often the case in grounded theory research, the study ultimately veered in another direction, focusing on the issues of emotion management, intimacy and resilience detailed in the introduction.<sup>11</sup> My initial interest in lastingness, however, shaped the research design. In the discussion that follows, I present an overview of the parameters and methods of the study, accounting for the study's design, which was intended to understand what made for enduring relationships.

## **The study**

### *Background*

Anchored largely in social demography, much of our contemporary sociological inquiry on couples and marriages focuses on who gets married, when and why; variations in marital outcomes between groups (e.g. racial, religious, age); as well as how all of those patterns have evolved in the midst of social, cultural and economic changes in society (Cherlin 2009). If we think of relationships as having three dimensions –

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<sup>10</sup> Forty-eight men and women (24 couples) were actually interviewed for the study. However, three couples subsequently requested that their information from their interviews be excluded from publication. Due to the iterative nature of my analysis, while not quoted or included in tables on couples' demographics, their accounts contributed to many of the concepts and insights I developed in this study.

<sup>11</sup> Preliminary research questions and data collection in grounded theory research is often guided by broad empirical interests and sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1969). The study's ultimate theoretical orientation, however, is data-driven, derived from patterns and themes that emerge in data analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Charmaz 2006).

individual, interpersonal and social (Lewis and Spanier 1979) – sociologists have developed a considerable body of knowledge about the individual (e.g. partners' premarital traits, attitudes, beliefs and family origins) and social dimensions (e.g. couples' socioeconomic circumstances) (Pinsof 2002; Cherlin 2004). Sociologists have many lingering questions about the interpersonal processes, functioning and mechanisms (i.e. gender role compatibility, emotional investment, power dynamics and problem solving) that enable relationships that *do work to work*. This, however, was not always the case.

Although currently dominated by social psychology, social work and communication studies, until the early 1970s research on the functioning of couples' relationships in marriage and family was largely undertaken by sociologists. Much of this work used large-scale surveys with self-assessments of relationship quality (e.g. happiness, satisfaction, etc.) to elucidate how these evaluations correlated with a range of demographic characteristics (Skolnick 2002). Another smaller body of research drawing on in-depth qualitative studies, by contrast, focused on *processes* that shaped the way marital relationships functioned. Berger and Kellner's (1964) seminal work on interdependence and the social (co)construction of marriage shed light on the social process of "coupling" through which two autonomous individuals came to construct a private sphere and shared inner world. Likewise, Mirra Komarovsky's (1962) case study on white working-class married couples challenged beliefs that the companionate model of marriage prevalent among white middle-class Americans was actually representative of Americans at large. Sadly, such inquiry began to fall out of vogue in the latter half of the 20th century.

The greater focus on married couples' lived experience in the past undoubtedly reflects the fact that for much of American history, most marriages endured until one partner's death, rather than divorce, made them part (Pinsoff 2002).<sup>12</sup> Remaining in relationships *was* the norm (Skolnick 2002, Gottman 1994). As divorce rates increased, family studies began to concentrate more on macro-patterns of marital formation and dissolution, in the aim of capturing the antecedents of divorce and contributors to diminished and delayed marriage. As a result, in the dominant body of research in the sociology of marriage and family, less attention has been paid in recent years to the lived experience of intimate relationships.

Just as in the past, sociologists stand to bring distinctive insights to knowledge about the significance of closeness in couples' relationships. Sociologists are uniquely positioned to unearth how individuals understand and experience intimacy. Our tools of inductive analysis can shed light on meaning-making, including issues such as how cultural norms and frames that inform their relationships, why they engage or refrain from particular practices, and the emotional work that goes into managing their dynamics.

### *Research design*

Drawing on the tradition of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969), I conducted three semi-structured, in-depth interviews with each couple – one joint and one with each partner. Interviews offered me insight into the range of subjective meanings and rationale individuals attach to individual actions and interpersonal practices in intimate

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<sup>12</sup> The increased concentration on outcomes also paralleled an increasing sophistication of statistical methods that often resulted in greater emphasis on quantifying outcomes in the discipline, further exacerbating the neglect of dynamics and attributes less amenable to being quantified (Komarovsky 1962; Glenn 1996).

relationships (Flick 2002). Using a semi-structured interview format allowed me to explore core research issues while remaining malleable and responsive to unanticipated themes, concerns or issues introduced by participants themselves (Oppenheim 1992). Interviews may be uniquely suited to probing couple's relationship histories and elucidating developmental *processes*, shedding light on how logics and strategies of action evolve over time. In their longitudinal study of men and women's perceptions of developments in their relationships, Holmberg et al (2004) had them construct narratives, that is "story-like constructions told to other people [or ourselves], in which individuals try to summarize, explain and make sense of stressful, complex, or emotion-laden events in their lives" (10; see also Orbuch 1997). Mishler (1986) suggests that storytelling is so integral to human experience that interviewees are likely to tell stories unless discouraged (See also Ewick and Silbey 2003). Thus, having couples engage in the familiar process of telling stories can be an effective way of helping them articulate how they understand situations and relationships they may not have explicitly reflected on before. The reflective process of constructing "their story" enables partners to grasp the significance and reconcile the complexity of experiences in their relationships by endowing them with meaning (Orbuch 1997; Quinn 1996).

Much of the existing research on couples has drawn on the perspectives of one partner (predominantly women), although some scholars have questioned the wisdom of relying on only one partner's perspective (Handel 1996). Holmberg et al. (2004) suggest that joint interviews provide researchers with a front row seat into couples co-creation of meaning, while Babbie (2004) contends that interviewing people together often helps elicit "aspects of the topic that would not have been anticipated by the researcher and would

not have emerged from interviews with individuals” (303). By using a tri-fold interview, I aimed to develop a rich, multilayered view of individual partners and the couple as a unit.

Interview protocols were developed after surveying similar studies probing dynamics in couples’ relationships (Buehlman et al 1992; Orbuch et al 1996; Alford Cooper 1998; Holmberg et al. 2004) (See *Appendix A* for interview schedule). The joint interview probed the course and evolution of their relationship: how they met, courted, and decided to get married; good and bad times in their relationships; sources of tension and conflict as well as joy and triumph, their definitions of appropriate gender roles; what makes for a good relationship; as well as how their perceptions of what marriage required evolved over the years. It was organized around three broad categories: early years (meeting and early impressions, adjustments in the first year of marriage/living together); relationship maintenance (daily routines and activities; household decision making and conflict management; and interpersonal dynamics) and general reflections on relationships. I also asked them to define what practices and qualities they felt were essential for making their relationship work as well as the traits/facets of the relationship they'd come to value and love. In this aim, I asked couples to think back over their relationship – happy and joyful moments, but also challenging and pressing times.

In piloting the interviews, I found that asking direct questions about partners views on what made relationships work often yielded general statements and platitudes, like: communication, trust, commitment, etc. When probed further, participants could seldom articulate why these qualities and/or actions were important or how they functioned in their own relationships. Those shortcomings reflected flaws in my approach, not

respondents' thoughtfulness. In revising the interview protocol, I asked more questions about specific moments and occasions. I also asked couples to talk through recent events reflective of their dynamics. For instance, instead of asking what kinds of things they argue about, I asked them to recount their last argument, unpacking how it unfolded:

1. How did it start?
2. What happened next/how did it escalate (probing how each felt, how did he/she react, what did they think their partner was feeling, etc.)?
3. How did it end and was there any repair work after the conflict (immediately or later) to try to heal the rift?<sup>13</sup>

I also asked them to walk me through their past week (or a typical week if the last one was atypical), to help them recall concrete details about their routines, shared activities and interactions.

Individual interviews probed each individual partner's background and history in greater depth, while offering respondents an opportunity to clarify topics that had come up in the joint interview. In them, I narrowed in on a few key personal relationships (e.g. parents, other family members and their own past relationships) to better understand how they framed their current relationship practices in relation to their personal history. On a practical level, conducting the second individual interview also offered me another pass at clarifying issues brought up in the joint interview.

While interviews with the couples serve as the primary data source for the study, I also conducted a smaller sample of interviews with twelve relationship professionals (secular and religious marital counselors, therapists, popular relationship experts, etc.). I sought out those who worked extensively, but not exclusively, with black couples. These

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<sup>13</sup> Gottman and Silver (1999) suggest that couples repair work post-conflict may be more important for their satisfaction and closeness than any other part of the argument.

interviews were particularly helpful in highlighting salient lessons and emotion norms in clients' socialization that undermined relationships.

### *Sample parameters*

Criteria for the study were fairly clear-cut. First and foremost both partners had to self-identify as black. There are a number of gaps in our understanding of black men and women's perspectives of the lived experience of marriage and intimate relationships more broadly (Burton and Tucker 2009). A substantial and broad literature has interrogated the formation, structure and challenges of "the black family," particularly over the 50+ years since the Moynihan report (See Furstenberg 2007 for a comprehensive review). Much less, however, has examined the lived experience of intact black couples outside the lens of the black family (McAdoo 2007; Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1995; Helm and Carson 2013). This dearth is particularly marked in the growing body of qualitative research examining how individuals make sense of their intimate relationships, as highlighted in the introduction. While this literature has developed significantly in the last three decades (Hochschild 1989; Riessman 1990; Vaughan 1990; Duncombe and Marsden 1993; Swidler 2001), it has largely examined the experiences of middle class white Americans (but see DeVault 1999; Smith 1993; Tucker and Crouter 2008).<sup>14</sup>

By focusing solely on black couples, who have been both understudied and under-theorized, my work is consistent with much of the existing in-depth qualitative research on couples, which tends to be racially homogenous. Nevertheless, there are some

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<sup>14</sup> Karney and Bradbury's (1995) meta-analysis of longitudinal research on marriage found that 75% of the samples were white and middle class and this trend persists. Of Cooper's (2014) study of 50 families in Silicon Valley, 2 were black and in Pugh's recent (2015) study of families only 8 of the 80 people interviewed were black, despite drawing a sample from DC and Richmond, VA in which nearly half of the population of both is black.



limitations to this approach. I sacrifice some of the analytical purchase of making claims about comparative cultural differences between blacks and other groups. To that end, my insights about cultural variation tend to underline patterns in my sample that resonate with findings in extant research. While limiting my sample to black men and women poses some limitations, it also offers some gains. First, my study responds to calls from a number of scholars of marriage and personal relationships to examine couples of color in order to diversify research in this domain (Schwartz 1994; DeVault 1999). Indeed some marital researchers have begun to specifically call for racially homogenous studies in order to begin building knowledge about couples of color (Bryant et al. 2010; McLoyd et al. 2005). Finally, focusing on a racially homogenous group also has the benefit of helping us understand nuance and variation *within* a group, the kind that can be lost in racially comparative studies.

My second criterion was length of relationship, where I set the parameter as ten to forty years. I set the lower bounds for length of relationship based on data that shows one-half of first marriages among blacks disrupt within 10 years (Phillips and Sweeney 2005; Raley and Bumpass 2003). Couples who've spent at least a decade together have had to navigate multiple life stages (e.g. children, death of parents, career changes, etc.) and have had time for their perspectives and approaches for relationships to evolve and solidify (Tucker and Crouter 2008). At the same time, the upper bound of forty years meant the couples got together in the 1970s or later, so their relationships developed in the midst of the social and cultural shifts scholars have deemed responsible for changes and deinstitutionalization of marriage, like the feminist revolution and women's increased economic independence, and shifting social norms around cohabitation and

divorce (Cherlin 2004; 2009; Becker 1991; Sweeney 2006; Bumpass and Lu 2000; Bellah et al 1985).

Given my initial interest in *endurance* in relationships, as opposed to *satisfaction* or *quality*, I did not seek out “strong” or “happy” couples. Indeed, part of what I wanted to understand was how couples who have stayed together perceive the quality of their relationships.<sup>15</sup> Examining couples in long-lasting relationships (10+ years) extends the terrain of research on couples in general, which tend to focus on newlyweds or those early enough in the relationship to have young children at home (Goodwin 2003; Holmberg et al 2004; Hochschild 1989). It also answers calls for additional research on lasting relationships among black Americans (Mackey and O’Brien 1995; Hill 2005; Cutrona et al. 2011). My interest in endurance also led me to include cohabiting couples that met the bounds for length of relationship, but intended to marry.<sup>16</sup> Given that the study privileges depth over breadth, I wanted to have as much internal diversity in my sample as possible. Thus I didn’t want to risk missing the experiences of black couples that had developed enduring relationships outside of marriage.<sup>17</sup>

The final criteria stipulated that *both* partners also had to be willing to participate in the study and agree to two interviews – one jointly and one individually. As noted above in existing scholarship on relationships there is a tendency to explore the perspective of

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<sup>15</sup> To this point, Naomi Quinn (1996) observes, "Lastingness is a property of a successful marriage; all successful marriages are lasting ones but not all lasting marriages are successful ones; in fact, there are plenty of unsuccessful old marriages around... We call them 'unhappy'" (403).

<sup>16</sup> Recent studies suggest cohabitation is increasingly accepted not only as a "socially sanctioned" trial for marriage, but also as an alternative to it (Cherlin 2004; Bumpass and Lu 2000; Wu 2000). The 2010 census shows 6.8 million opposite-sex unmarried partner households, up from 4.9 million in 2000 (Lofquist et al. 2012). Brown and Booth (1996), for example, found that cohabiting couples that intended to marry were just as satisfied with their relationship as married couples. Some scholars posit that for African American couples, in particular, cohabitation may even be becoming *the* alternative to marriage or being single (Smock 2000; Jayakody and Cabrera 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Coincidentally, the unmarried couples in the sample all got married within a year of being interviewed.

only one spouse, often the woman. A full understanding of relationship dynamics also requires consideration of how men think about, assess and approach their intimate relationships. Including black men's perspectives on intimate relationships is particularly important as they are rarely examined (Hill 2005), and research that has probed their perspectives focuses largely on black male youth, from poor urban environments (Fosse 2010; But see Cazenave 1983). As Dr. Tera Hurt, a former research scientist for the Program for Strong African American Marriages highlights, "much of the research to date has focused on why Black men do not marry...What is sorely missing from the discourse on Black marriage is attention to what marriage means to married Black men" (2005:4; See also Marks et al. 2010).

### *Recruitment*

Early in the study, I sent requests for participation to civic organizations, churches, and neighborhood community centers. I also reached out to professional groups (e.g. alumni associations) and social groups (meet-up groups, book clubs, etc.). My early data collection in New York, however, revealed that method was ineffective. Despite sending out numerous blind requests, only one couple was recruited in that manner.<sup>18</sup> I cannot know for sure, but suspect the lack of response to cold-contacts was due to the personal nature of the topic creating (understandable) wariness about sharing with a relative stranger. My early pitfalls made it clear that I needed someone who could personally vouch for me and the study. Thus, most participants were recruited via introductions from my personal network.

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<sup>18</sup> The frenetic pace of life in New York likely also played a role. Scheduling and completing the full set of interviews there was more difficult than in the other cities.

I tried to increase internal diversity by interviewing couples in multiple locales, namely from three large metropolitan areas of the US: New York City, Chicago and Cleveland. The cities were chosen due to a combination of the size of the black population and access. According to the 2010 census, of the American cities with the largest population of blacks, New York and Chicago rank first and second, respectively (Rastogi et al. 2011). While Cleveland has fewer blacks in absolute terms, more than half of its population identified as black in the 2010 census. Ohio was also one of ten states with the largest black populations (*Ibid.*). Of the 21 total couples in the study, 8 were from New York, 7 from Chicago and 6 from Cleveland metro.

Given the personal nature of the interviews, one limitation of the study is that there was likely a self-selection bias in my sample whereby unhappy or dissatisfied couples may have been less likely to volunteer to participate. It is worth noting, I also solicited recommendations for participants from the relationship professionals. Seven couples were suggested from three of the professionals, two of which agreed to be interviewed. Only one could actually be interviewed as an unexpected death in their family made it impossible to interview the second couple.

Qualitative methods don't allow for making the kind of claims of generalizability or to shed light on widespread trends, as is often done in much of contemporary sociology. To that end, the seventy-five interviews conducted for this study (twelve experts and sixty-three with couples -forty-two men and women interviewed jointly and individually) were not intended to offer a representative sample. Instead, their accounts were analyzed with the aim of elucidating a variety of experiences and subjective outlooks that shape how men and women make sense of their intimate relationships.

### *Procedure*

All interviews were conducted between April 2011 and September 2013 by the researcher. Interviews were held in a date and place of the respondents' choosing. In the case of all but one couple,<sup>19</sup> the joint interview was conducted in their home, enabling me to observe couple's interactions within their family environment. Individual interviews were conducted in a broader range of places as convenient for respondents including at home, at their workplace, and in cafes as was convenient for participants. Each of the joint interviews lasted a couple of hours, most ranging from one hour forty-five minutes to three hours. The individual interviews were shorter, tending to last between forty-five minutes and one and a half hours. Interviews were audio-recorded. Respondents were assured confidentiality, including any sharing of responses with their spouse/partner. To protect their identity, respondents are referred to by pseudonyms in the text.

In each case, the joint interview was conducted first, followed by each of the individual interviews. In piloting the interviews, I found that conducting the individual interviews first wasn't as conducive to the mutual reconstruction of their couple story. Conversely, when they were interviewed jointly first they had to work together to recall and re-member the details and milestones in their story. I began each joint interview asking the couple how long they'd been together and then asking them to tell me their story, beginning with how they met. For most, initiating this process of working together to reconstruct their story seemed to put them at ease. Having couples co-construct "their story" not only shed light on their subjective realities, it also illuminated dynamics as they negotiated who led and followed in the telling, the extent of overlap and dissonance

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<sup>19</sup> One partner's parent was terminally ill and lived with them, making it difficult to hold the interview at their home.

in their versions of events, how they reconciled disagreement, and whose recollections were given more credence. Following the interview, I elaborated on my field notes and listened to the recordings to capture any emergent questions or themes. This strategy was particularly helpful in preparing me to ask follow up questions in the individual interview.

While I anticipated that the individual interviews would also allow participants to clarify their own perspective, I hadn't quite expected how eager some were for the opportunity to address unresolved issues from the joint interviews. Some partners came with “introspective homework,” as one respondent called it, prepared with recollections of specific instances to illustrate some point they'd been trying to pin down. Several times, respondents would come back telling me how they'd chewed on certain questions they'd felt ill-equipped to answer during the joint interview— especially aspects they weren't comfortable sharing in front of their significant other. Some even arrived with notes or phrases they jotted down in the interim. These accounts, in particular, have been key to illuminating some of those turning points and “Ah hah!” moments they'd experienced over the course of the relationship. As one husband reflected, “You're really making me think about those things in a way that I've never thought about them. We go through them and you know sit back and that's not the way we think about them so much.” Participants’ ability to reflect on what they’d said in the joint interview before the individual interview was an added, if inadvertent, benefit to the overall texture and depth of the interviews.

One of the richest sources of data came from couples' non-verbal gestures and physical interactions in the joint interviews. Listening and watching as they reminisced

on the trials and errors of creating a shared life, I was offered a window into how they engaged with each other: poking and ribbing each other about age-old arguments, throwing their heads back in laughter at mishaps and sometimes, growing silent and reserved as they bowed in tears. I was also able to see what caused them to lean in and draw towards one another and when they turned away. One wife, for instance, had a habit of picking lint or brushing eyelashes off her husband's face even as he spoke - to which he did not so much as flinch. Getting increasingly close to one another during the course of an interview, another husband stroked the inside of his wife's ankles, as she tucked her feet under his thighs. Being able to call on observations from my field notes, undoubtedly, added specificity and texture to the descriptions I sketch of couples.

Dealing with such personal matters as the intimate details of individuals' lives is a delicate process for the researcher and participants alike (Lightfoot and Davis 1997). In that process, I tried to follow partners' lead, listening closely and remaining attuned to where I needed to tread lightly and to recognize issues too tender to burden with words. Over the course of the most benign interview, a person can sometimes be taken back to an intense, troubling time. In these interviews, however, I probed some flashpoints and tender places intentionally, asking couples to reflect on issues like ongoing arguments, infidelity and separations. Recognizing that I raised issues that could still be points of contention between couples (e.g. infidelity, unresolved conflict, loss of children, etc.), I tried to end joint interviews on a high note. The last two questions in every joint interview were: "What do you love most about your significant other?" and "If you had to choose three words to describe your relationship, what would they be?"

As a black American female researcher, I was simultaneously an insider and an outsider in relation to the men and women I interviewed. I was an insider in terms of race, and with the female partners, gender. My overlap with interviewees in terms of regional background, education, and class was a bit more complex. Born and raised in the Midwest, yet living most of my adult life in metropolitan areas of the Northeast, I was familiar with the regional differences among participants across the board. Raised in a low-income, single parent home, I grew up in a working poor community. At the same time, being educated in elite higher education institutions in the US and abroad, I'm equally familiar with more privileged and cosmopolitan environs. This cross-class familiarity has made me highly adept at cultural code-switching to build rapport with participants (Carter 2005).

In the context of this study, I was an outsider in one important way - in never being married. In this sense, I believe my outsider status was an asset, allowing me to (honestly) present myself as a novice in understanding what it takes to sustain a long-term relationship. As is always the case in interview interactions, men's and women's perceptions of my identity likely influenced what information participants obscured and revealed. There was no way to fully anticipate *how* those perceptions would shape a given interaction. To this end, I read couples' characterizations of themselves, their actions and their relationships not as objective accounts, but rather as "family displays" - information couples convey to the researcher (and each other) in describing themselves that reflect both their family practices and their idiosyncratic identity as a unit (Morgan 1996, 2011).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Family displays can be understood as a more general version of Hochschild's analogous concept of "family myths," which she defines as "versions of relationship that obscure a core truth to manage family



### *Couple demographics*

Forty-two participants, composing 21 heterosexual couples, took part in the study. All participants self-identified as African American or black and were between the ages of 33 and 75, with a mean age of 49.9 years. The average age of women was 48.9 years (range 33-74, median 49) and for men 51 years (range 34-75, median 53).

The average length of marriage among these couples was 23.6 years (range median: 25 years). Couples dated for an average of 3.4 years before marrying (median: 4 years) and 80% (17) cohabited before marrying. Most partners were in their first marriage, but in three of the couples one or both partners were in their second marriage (See Table 1). 90% (19) of couples had children together, but only 42% (9) still had children living at home. Only 10% (2) of couples didn't share biological children; in one, the husband had children from a previous marriage, while in the other couple both partners had children from a previous marriage.

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tensions” (1989:19). Whether used to conceal or reveal family tensions, the mutual meaning-making revealed in these narratives offer important insight into how couples perceive themselves - or want to be perceived (Goffman 1959).

**Table 1: Summary of Participants**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years Married</b>	<b>Children at home</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Home</b>
Steve Bianca	H: 39 W: 35	10	Y	BA BA	Sales Personal Coach	Own
Will Tiara	H: 40 W: 35	11	Y	Adv Adv	Prof Attorney	Rent
Tommy Zona	H: 34 W: 34	11	N	Post-HS BS	Warehouse wrk Nurse	Rent
Carl Danielle	H: 41 W: 33	11	Y	HS BA	Real Estate Childcare	Own
Greg Jolene	H: 46 W: 40	12	Y	Adv Adv	Attorney Banking	Own
Rob Rosie	H: 36 W: 42	13	Y	BA BA	Police Clerical	Rent
Alan Dawn*	H: 56 W: 50	14	Y	HS BA	Unemployed Childcare	Own
Shawn Amber	H: 44 W: 42	15	Y	Adv Adv	Business exec Unemp (Mrktg)	Own
Marlon Alyna	H: 42 W: 47	15	Y	Adv Post-HS	Entrepreneur Marketing (PT)	Own
Clift Ticora	H: 43 W: 38	16	Y	Post-HS HS	Security Retail	Rent
John Karen	H: 56 W: 52	25	N	HS HS	Postal worker Childcare (PT)	Own
Eddie* Sharon	H: 62 W: 58	25	N	Post-HS HS	Postal worker Sales	Own
Andrew Anna	H: 61 W: 46	26	N	HS HS	Construction Retired	Rent
Nathan Angel	H: 53 W: 53	27	N	BS BA	Engineer Marketing	Own
Doug Wanda	H: 51 W: 49	27	N	BA BA	Unemployed Clerical	Own
Jonathan* Ruth*	H: 75 W: 74	27	N	HS HS	Retired/Carpenter Retired (Clerical)	Own
Wesley Cynthia	H: 72 W: 62	29	N	BA BA	Artist/Prof Entrepreneur	Rent
Darren Kristian	H: 58 W: 54	31	N	Post-HS BA	Nonprofit (youth) Retired	Own
Aaron Joy	H: 62 W: 58	30	N	Adv Adv	Prof/artist Nonprofit Exec	Own
Jed Gail	H: 54 W: 52	34	N	HS HS	Unemployed Customer service	Rent
Keith Carol	H: 60 W: 58	40	N	BA BA	Insurance Retired	Own

\* Indicates partner who had a previous marriage.

Education: HS = high school, Post-HS (some college, vocational training), BA = undergraduate degree, Adv = graduate degree (MBA, JD, PhD)

In terms of their broader socioeconomic characteristics, one critical limitation of my analysis is the inability to offer a more complete picture of class characteristics due to

incomplete data on partners' income. Although I assured participants their information would be confidential, partners in 1/3 of couples still refrained from designating their income bracket. As a result, I detail other characteristics social scientists employ as determinants of class like education, occupation and homeownership. Two-thirds of the couples in the sample owned their home (14) while the other third rented (7).

**Table 2: Class breakdown of couples by education**

**Socioeconomic class by degree**

	<b>Upper-Middle</b>	<b>Middle</b>	<b>Working</b>
	At least one partner w/advanced degree	At least one partner w/ undergraduate degree	Neither with undergraduate degree
<b>Couples N = 21</b>	23.8% (5)	47.6% (10)	28.5% (6)
<b>Typical jobs</b>	attorney, banker, professor, nonprofit executive	clerical assistant, police officer, engineer, artist, insurance agent	postal worker, janitorial, childcare, customer service, warehouse worker, security

In terms of education, 26% (11) of participants had a high school diploma, 12%(5) received some training beyond high school (e.g. vocational training or some college), 40%(17) earned a college degree, and 21%(9) earned a graduate degree.<sup>21</sup> Women were slightly more educated than men in the sample with two-thirds of women (14) having at least an undergraduate degree as compared to just over half of men (11). Table 3 illustrates that the men and women in my sample are more educated than both the U.S. and African American population. It is worth noting, however, that the educational

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<sup>21</sup> Gender breakdown of education in sample: Women: 29.5%(6) earned a high-school diploma, 5% (1) received some training beyond high-school, 48%(10) earned a college degree, and 19%(4) earned a graduate degree. Men: 29.5%(6) earned a high-school diploma, 19%(4) received some training beyond high school, 29.5%(6) earned a college degree, and 23% (5) earned a graduate degree.

profile is more nuanced than the numbers reveal. Three of the women had only received their Bachelor's degree in the last year before the interview was conducted. As a result, those women were in their 40s or 50s, but had yet to accrue any of the earning or occupational benefits that came with reaching that benchmark of educational attainment. All were still in the same jobs they'd had before earning their degree.

The couples' demographic characteristics are also complicated by factors not easily captured by traditional measures of education, occupation and income – namely providing assistance to kin. For instance, 52% (11) of the men had been unemployed for six months or longer. This was particularly true in the case of those who did not have a college education, among whom 80% had been unemployed and all but one of those men at least twice over the course of the relationship.

Equally important, standard measures don't capture issues like financial contributions and assistance given to extended family can further limit couples' resources and put a strain on their relationships (Clark-Nicolas and Gray-Little 1991). There's a considerable literature on how impoverished social networks impact low-income blacks (Massey and Denton 1993; Stack 1974; Smith 2007). Yet, recent studies suggest poor networks are also impacting middle-income blacks who have a greater likelihood of having friends or family in poverty than middle-income whites. Heflin and Pattillo (2006) found that compared to middle-income whites, middle-income blacks were more than twice as likely to have a poor sibling and four times more likely to have a sibling in poverty, while Raley (1995) found that among unmarried respondents blacks were more likely to offer informal assistance to kin other than parents. Furthermore, Chiteji and Hamilton's (2002) analysis of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), suggests that 36 percent of

parents of middle-income black families lived below the poverty line, compared to only 8 percent of their white counterparts. In a study of black marriages, Marks et al. (2006) found that couples giving out support to family, extended family, or fictive kin had been a constant stressor on their marriage. Finding those requests for help so common in couples' accounts, the authors came to conceptualize them as "knocks of need" (Marks et al., 2008; Marks et al., 2006).<sup>22</sup> In my sample 66% (14) of the couples spoke of contributing financial support to kin who weren't their children (e.g. parents, siblings, nieces or nephews). Moreover, 57% (12) of the couples had taken in a family member to live with them for six months to a year, and several had done so multiple times.

**Table 3: Education: Sample vs US and African American population**

	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Black Americans</b>	<b>U.S.</b>
<b>Education</b>			
- HS	28.6%	27.2%	24.6%
- Post-HS, not BA	11.9%	22.2%	28.9%
- Bachelors	38%	11.5%	17.6%
- Adv degree	21.4%	6%	10.3%

### *Analytical approach*

Following conventions of grounded theory, I took an iterative approach in conducting my analysis, returning to the data in multiple waves. I went over my notes from each interview and transcript independently before comparing them, looking for the salient takeaways from the couple's struggles, joys and lessons. What was most valued and treasured about their relationships? What lessons and "Ah hah" moments were reiterated

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<sup>22</sup> Chiteji and Hamilton (2002) suggest that the greater need of black parents and siblings may account for 11 percent of the black-white wealth gap, *after* controlling for average lifetime income and parental wealth and inheritances.

in their narratives? I also spent hours listening to the recordings of the interviews. Immersing myself in both the recordings and transcripts brought me back to the lived experience of the interview. I was also attentive to issues raised spontaneously and organically by the couples. "What you really need to look at," they'd say. Or, "But this is the thing folks don't understand". I worked to locate central issues and generate general theories and hypotheses about how their relationships functioned – or failed to.

As analyzing new interviews helped me refine key concepts and theories, I poured over the data again armed with those new theories (Glasser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006). In order to avoid the pitfalls of over-coding, I did much of the early coding by hand. Once central categories and concepts were defined and identified, I used ATLAS-ti qualitative data analysis software to aid the process of coding and data reduction of subsequent interviews.

Recently, a number of scholars have questioned what can really be learned from interviews (Vaisey 2009, 2013; Jerolmack and Kahn 2014). Certainly, such methods don't allow for generalizability. Yet, when interviews are used in the service of phenomenological, interpretive approaches to examining the social world, they can provide in-depth knowledge about individual's sensibilities, worldviews and perceptions of continuity and change over time. Additionally, in studying thousands of couples in research and clinical settings over the last forty years, clinical psychologist and marital scholar John Gottman has drawn on a range of techniques (e.g. physiological probes, short and extended observations, and in-depth interviews). Still, Gottman contends that the information gathered from interviews, particularly a couple's "story of us" is his most effective tool for predicting the future of a relationship because it offers a dynamic

appraisal of the relationship (Gottman 2012, 2014), lending further credence to value of using in-depth interviews to understand couple relationships.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, interviews may be uniquely suited to probing what Lamont and Swidler (2014) characterize as “imagined meanings” or rationale that individuals attach to their activities, habits, and self-concepts which the authors note “we generally cannot get at those without asking, or at least without talking to people” (158). Similarly, Allison Pugh’s (2013a) reminds that the interpretive work of interviewers includes:

the focused plumbing of meaning, the work of reading deeply into someone’s emotional and schematic messages to try to understand what is *not* being said as much as what is. Interviewers reach beyond what people say to how they say it, and do so with particular skills and tactics honed in practice, observation and reflection; in other words, researchers in this tradition do not simply translate, but *interpret*, enabling elucidation of the visceral emotional layer that can prove elusive in other methodological approaches (160).

In offering rationale for *why* they did what they've done, people are able to display how they conceptualize ideal ways of thinking and acting (Harre et al. 1985), which offers researchers insight into the norms and cultural frameworks they draw on in understanding their worlds (Swidler 2001). In this regard, I drew on interviews to elucidate precisely those “cultural schemas available in a social environment as well as the schemas to which people have emotional attachments,” that critics like Vaisey (2014: 8) suggest interviews are particularly useful for.

### *Theoretical Orientation*

As is often the case in grounded theory research, I arrived at my conceptual focus on emotion work in my attempt to unpack and understand a few empirical puzzles. Early in my analysis, I was puzzled by what left some couples that seemed to deeply care about

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<sup>23</sup> My joint interviews drew heavily on Gottman and colleagues’ oral history interview (Buehlman et al 2003).

one another struggling with connecting. Initially, I sought answers by looking for differences between couples – how in all but six couples, partners characterized their significant other as their best or closest friend – without being asked about it explicitly. I also wanted to better understand differences in the meaning and significance couples gave to the same carework (e.g. compromise as adjustment vs. compromise as sacrifice). My intrigue with this question was also influenced by knowledge of previous research in which marital scholars in sociology and social psychology alike observed a perplexing pattern: black couples’ relationships seem to be marked by lower levels of interdependence and emotional intimacy. Whyte (1990) suggests that black couples’ relationships are often marked by greater brittleness and spouses’ “incomplete mergers,”<sup>24</sup> whereby they exhibit less mutuality and togetherness (e.g. confiding first in their partner in the midst of trials), place less emphasis on satisfying each other’s needs, having common interests and doing things together, and maintain separate activities and finances. Similarly, Holmberg et al.’s (2004) analysis of 373 couples in their longitudinal Early Years of Marriage study suggests that interdependence may simply not be as important to marital stability for black marriages as for whites; yet the authors are not certain how to account for that difference (*Ibid.*; Orbuch et al. 2002).

Nevertheless, as my analysis deepened, what became clear was that there were instances when partners’ attempts at connection and closeness broke down in *all* couples’ accounts. Similarly, most partners told of how they’d had to learn and develop ways to push themselves to bridge distance – being vulnerable, revealing their needs and

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<sup>24</sup> I question the term “incomplete” as it suggests there’s an ideal relationship destination, yet everyone doesn’t have expectations of having their partner/spouse be their best friend (Komarovsky 1962) and a high degree of intimacy and interdependence isn’t necessarily something they aspire to (Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1995).



supporting their significant other in uncomfortable ways. Eventually, I realized the critical issue wasn't what differentiated couples, but rather what differentiated successful *attempts* at connection from those that left partners feeling disconnected – both of which occurred in *every* couple. As a result, I shifted the focus to analyzing how men and women, jointly and individually, cultivated a sense of connection. Given previous research suggesting black couples rate their relationships as having less intimacy and a less integrated sense of shared identity, I tried to gain insight into both facets of connection.

Shifting my tactic and focusing my analysis on couples' attempts at connection was important for several reasons. First, it allowed me to make for effective use of my data, allowing me to look not only across couples, but also within them. Secondly, it also enabled me to better capture the dynamism of relationships, offering insight into change and continuity in participants' perspectives and practices over the course of the relationship. Finally, it allowed me to avoid imposing an artificial frame that would have obscured and diminished the considerable nuance and dynamism that their accounts of their experiences and relationships evidenced. To this point, Mirra Komarovsky (1962) cautioned that despite the temptation to “speak of distinctive patterns of marriage... of discrete subgroups with sharply contrasting types of marriage,” the internal complexity of relationships did not readily lend itself to those kinds of conclusions. Some couples in her sample felt satisfied and content in some areas of their relationship, yet struggled with others – patterns that greatly resonated with my own findings. As a result, she organized *Blue Collar Marriages* around how commonalities and divergence in patterns of beliefs and behavior across varied kinds of couple *interactions* shaped marital problems (22).

Building on Komarovsky's insight, I refrain from proposing any typologies of couples. Instead, in the succeeding chapters I present an inductively derived analysis of the repertoire of feeling rules, frames and emotion strategies partners brought into and cultivated within their relationships. Ultimately, understanding couple dynamics among my sample required probing how men and women understood, framed, and managed feelings in their attempts to connect – in a word, emotion work.

### **Chapter 3 - More than intimate strangers: Partners' experiences and perspectives on closeness**

At the heart of most conceptualizations of intimacy are acts of mutual disclosure. Wynne and Wynne (1986), for instance, define intimacy as “a *subjective relational* experience in which the core components are *trusting self-disclosure* to which the response is *communicated empathy*...a key component is the *willingness* to share, verbally or nonverbally, personal feelings, fantasies, and emotionally meaningful experiences and actions [italics in the original]” (384). Jamieson’s “practices of intimacy” (2011), underlines actions that range from the “mutual self-disclosure and an appreciation of others’ unique qualities” (Jamieson 1993: 477) to practices like “giving to, sharing with, spending time with, knowing, practically caring for, feeling attachment to, expressing affection for” one’s partner (2011). These “practices of intimacy” are significant because they “enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other” (Jamieson 2011: 1).

Whether examining the more expressive or more instrumental forms of intimacy, the dominant narrative in research on intimacy in couples’ relationships suggests a fundamental disconnect between men and women. More precisely, extant research underlines gender differences in three areas: desires for emotional closeness and intimacy; concern and effort with maintaining the relationship; and satisfaction with closeness within it (Duncombe and Marsden 1993, 1995; Erickson 2005; Wilcox and Nock 2006). Moreover, it suggests partners interpret intra-couple differences around intimacy in gendered ways. A smaller body of research, however, questions the portrait of heterosexual relationships as distinct “his and hers” marriages (Bernard 1972) of “intimate strangers” (Rubin 1983). It suggests profound evolutions in sexuality and

interpersonal intimacy within heterosexual relationships (Cancian 1987; Giddens 1992; Schwartz 1994; Benjamin and Orly 1996). Thus, this research emphasizes that while gender differences exist, so too are there similarities, challenging the notion of his and hers approaches in cultivating intimacy (Wallerstein 1995; Orbuch 2009; Sternberg 1996, 1998). Still, the dominant narrative asserting asymmetry in how men and women navigate the emotional dimensions of their relationships persists. I contend, however, that the analytical orientation of extant research makes it difficult to evaluate either narrative. The focus on cross-gender *difference* in much of extant research, with little consideration of variations within gender, much less overlap between them, has left a rather incomplete picture of emotional dynamics in couples' relationships.

In this largely descriptive chapter, I offer an overview of the assessments and perspectives around connection held among women and men in my sample. With an eye to some of the gaps in extant research on carework, I go beyond a discussion of differences *between* men and women to also shed light on overlap between and variation within gender. By examining how women and men in the study perceive, evaluate and understand their closeness, I bring my work into conversation with previous research and debates on emotion management, intimacy, gender, and marriage.

In the discussion that follows, I present patterns around participants' perspectives on closeness and intimacy in their relationship. I organize the patterns around the three dimensions of asymmetry highlighted in extant research: desires and valuation of closeness, accountability for relationship maintenance (i.e. carework), and explanations for intra-couple differences in dealing with emotions.

## **I. Desiring and valuing closeness**

In 2/3 of the couples in my sample, both partners spoke of closeness with their significant other as a key strength of the relationship. This was also true of at least one partner in 16 couples (partners' estimation of the relationship wasn't always aligned). There were only five couples in which both partners felt like they struggled with their overall sense of closeness and needed to work on it more.

In explaining what it took to maintain that sense of closeness, I found that partners emphasized three principles that guided how they tried to create closeness and intimacy in their relationships.

*Feeling rule 1: Openness - Communicating with transparency*

Across accounts, partners echoed the importance of learning to "be open" "say what you feel" and "communicate – you have to communicate" for developing intimacy.

While extant research tends to emphasize differences and divergence in what men and women seek in terms of their desire and concern for self-disclosure, both women (15/21) *and* men (13/21) in the sample privileged the ability to feel like they could unmask and talk to one another. It was cited as important among at least one partner in 17 of 21 couples. Karen, a part-time childcare worker, married for 29 years to John, a postal worker, for instance tells me:

Not only was he my husband, he was my friend. And I mean that in every aspect of everything, of everything... things I don't talk to nobody else about I can talk to [him] about, you know? Life is not easy and it can be real stressful, but when you have somebody that will listen to you, and give you an honest opinion. Or sometimes you don't want an opinion you just want a listener, he can do that for you, he does that for me.

For John, that sense of ease in opening up to Karen was one of the great appeals early in the relationship:

Wow, I guess the most satisfying, you know we could ... almost like being with a friend you can, you can tell anything. You can share, you know share things with. [We] laughed a lot... As opposed to [pause] I don't know, I'm a type of person, you know, it's hard to share with anybody, it was never hard for me to share... share anything with her.

The emphasis on having someone to talk to resonates with Kitson and Holmes' (1992) longitudinal study of divorced and married couples, which found that the absence of "someone to talk things over with," was both the most influential factor leading to divorce and the most problematic issue for those still married. Hatfield and Rapson (1993) found that meaningful self-disclosure (e.g. sharing hopes and dreams, fears and worries) was positively associated with encouraging feelings of love, liking, caring, and trust between partners (See also Cordova and Scott 2001).

In highlighting the significance of open communication Angel, married 19 years says, "I think also, what serves us well ... We don't have to suppress any desires or wants or needs. We feel open to be able to communicate honestly, truthfully". Beyond sharing personal thoughts and feelings, partners also emphasized how communicating needs, expectations and concerns about the relationship was critical for fostering intimacy. Describing qualities he's found essential to a good marriage, Shawn, a sports executive married 15 years notes, "I think number one is the foundation should be candid communication. Like *no* walls about what you can and can't talk to that person about. Because if you're not happy about something and you don't express it, you're gonna have a problem long term. It's gonna build into something that's a mountain."

An essential part of that attempt to be candid and transparent with one another Shawn describes, was relinquishing expectations that one's partner should somehow "just know" what they need or engage in guesswork to "figure it out". Ruth, for instance, notes how Jonathan had clarified differences in their tolerance for being around people early in their relationship, after realizing that his disappearance when family came was causing tension. His explanation helped prevent her from taking it personally when he disappeared around company.

Ruth: When the grandkids come he disappears, you know, 'cause he don't like a lot of people and I know that... he used to say when we were dating, "Understand if I disappear, it's nothing wrong. It's just that you know I get tired of people," and he goes away. As long as you understand and you know ahead of time what the situation is, there's no need to get an attitude.

Derelega et al (1993) call such confidences "relational disclosures" which require acknowledging, stating and negotiating feelings and expectations about the relationship, their significant other and themselves. The need to erase expectations that one's significant other will *just know* what they need was echoed as a detriment to relationships by all the relationship counselors I interviewed. When I asked one marital counselor if she'd found individuals were being clear about relationship expectations and needs, she replied emphatically "No!":

Most of the time this is what keeps me in business. The pervasiveness of the notion that because this person loves me and they know what it is that pleases me. It's such a bunch of crap, because loving somebody doesn't make, you know, a mind reader... [so] when we're not doing well with each other, I start blaming you for the fact that I'm not happy but I haven't told you what it is [that] makes me happy.

*[Int]: You said part of why they're coming in is that they haven't shared their complete selves... Are people moving forward in relationships too quickly? Are they not taking the time to kinda unpack who they are or show who they are? What do you think is the cause of that?*

I think it's about self-awareness... people that are in healthy long-term relationships where both people are saying... not only is that my mate that is

my friend. And so it's people who worked on themselves and some way recognizing who they are, what they want, and how to be able to articulate that to somebody.

*Feeling rule 2: Mutual understanding – Staying attuned*

*You should make it possible for them to have something that they can't have alone. [pause] You got to bring something to them otherwise, what is [the point]? ... I mean it's like friendship, if you can't tell your friends the truth, who do you tell the truth to? [long pause]... if I can't be weak in it, if I can't seek refuge in it, if I can't get honesty out of it, then what, what do I have? And what is the relationship about? And why is it special? Because that's what you need, you need a witness. ~Aaron, visual artist, 34 years*

The second principle for staying connected salient in the interviews was cultivating a sense of mutual understanding, which required both a willingness to be both attentive to and accepting of one's partner. Several partners spoke of their relationship as a "safe space," noting how their significant other "allows me to be me," "listens to all crackpot dreams" and "all my quirky weird ways - he accept[s] them". As Steve explained:

*[Int]: You had a really profound way of putting the fact that the relationship is trial and error. ...you said it was a kind of "progressive science of learning" ... What are the kinds of lessons or tools that you've come across, or that you've been able to figure out in that progressive science?*

Steve: [It's] that "progressive science of learning one another"... Like I said earlier, with, you're always changing. Things I liked two years ago, I might not like anymore. Or the way I thought two years ago, I may not think that way anymore, because circumstances have changed, I've gotten older... it has impacted me and my thought process. So you have to constantly be willing to learn your mate, and not hold them in that same mold that they were ten years ago.

Telling of her understanding of Wesley, her husband of 34 years, Cynthia suggests that while understanding may always be partial and incomplete, it was important to remain attentive and aware, making the attempt to looking beyond one's own perspective and to understand your partner's perspective.

Cynthia: I think I've learned to understand him. I think I know him...I think I know him. But you know what? You never know a person completely and totally.



You never do. You think you do, but you never really know. People do things that you never would expect them to ... I think you have to pay attention actually... Sometimes we get too wrapped up in our own references, you don't pay attention.

In a similar fashion, Greg tells me:

It's a challenge. I mean, last year my new year's resolution ... [was] I want to do something for my wife... Every week. Every week do something with or for her. You know, every week I do something like I come in and *listen* to her. We come in and talk, even with family [here], seriously really talk.

*Feeling rule 3: Holding them up - Offering support as they need*

Finally, cultivating connection required being willing to offer support and care in their partner's idiom (Schwartz 1994: 56) or as popularized by Gary Chapman (2010 [1992]), in each other's "love language". As Shawn notes, "I try to do little things to make her feel and show that I love her, if it's just holding her hand, that's her love language, physical touch, you know quality time. The things I know that she likes, I make sure I do that". Cynthia describes the significance of the positive affirmation she received from Wesley when she decided to start an art gallery:

I think one of the greatest moments for me is when Wesley was back when ... he really had faith in me and my ability ... I... He was totally supportive. Stuck behind me. Helped me out. But always telling me, "You can do this. You can do this. You can do this." ... It's funny he didn't help fund the project, I was insistent about doing it myself – but he gave me something more. He was always talking me up. And I really needed that.

Ten years younger and less established than Wesley, she credits his encouragement with giving her the confidence to take the risk to strike out on her own.

Partners also described cultivating a willingness to offer that support even when it took a form that was uncomfortable or challenging. This is well illustrated with Tiara and Will. Married for eleven years, Tiara and Will met when they were both invited to speak at a bible study for a church youth group. Shared faith had been an area of common ground from the start. Yet, over the course of continued education, cultivating careers and

personal evolution, that ground shifted and their notions of God diverged. This was particularly the case for Will who had relinquish many notions he had when they met:

Will: The black and white sort of distinctions that were made in the various religious communities... the answers that they had provided about just about anything just didn't work for me anymore... that sort of took me just learning to grow comfortable in what, to use Tiara's language... I'm too comfortable in the gray... [but] I haven't gotten rid of the idea of God ... even if I don't assign the same sort of metaphysical, ultimacy to [God].

Despite his movement away from beliefs that once provided a shared terrain of comfort and security, Tiara still feels like she can turn to Will for the kind of spiritual support that had been foundational to their relationship.

*[Int]: You mentioned at some point that you felt like... you got what you needed*

Tiara: Yeah, I do...just in every sense. Like across the board... Will makes me laugh, but emotionally he's there. And if at the end of the day, if I say, "Will, I need you to pray for me," or "I found these scriptures, can you read them to me?" ...if he sees that it's something that I really need or really want in that moment, he'll do it. As much as he doesn't want to, he'll do it... there's times I'll be like, "Can you pray for me, but I need a real prayer, not just like a little prayer," he'll do it, you know?

In summary, in my sample most partners felt that closeness was a strength in their relationship and emotional intimacy seemed to be valued by men and women alike.

## **II. Accountability for relationship**

A second central theme in much of the existing research is that women tend to bear the brunt of responsibility for relationship maintenance (Erickson 2005; Gottman 1994). The assessment that women maintain the relationship was echoed by husbands and wives alike. My analysis suggests there was both gender difference and overlap in who managed the relationship. For instance, Bianca tells of how she and Steve's attempt to have a date night or date day at minimum every other week to "focus on one another and

attend to each other's needs," notes that she's more likely to do the planning, which she explains simply by, "I'm just a planner". Still she credits Steve with some of their more spontaneous moments, recalling, "Sometimes Steve will come up with a festival or you know like last year, he was like, 'Alright I'm not gonna tell you where we're going.' We hopped on the train and went downtown and stayed out almost all night on the water at a jazz festival." Their insistence on keeping a date night to stay connected echoes one marriage counselor's observation:

[One] thing too is that most of what happens to make a relationship work, people stop doing often once they get married... when you meet someone and you're dating, you'd be thinking about "What am I going to wear, where are we going?... all that stuff tends to disappear when you're together with that person every day. You don't have to make arrangements to see them. They see you with your hair messed and smelly breath and pajamas that are torn ... So planning basically comes to a screeching halt after - maybe not immediately, but at some point if somebody isn't paying attention.

As in previous research, there was a gendered pattern to managing couple outings and activities (DeVault 1991), often explained by women's claims that "it's just my personality" and "I get nervous [when I don't do it], so I handle it". Versions of Bianca's assertion that she's "just a planner" were frequently repeated in women's account (14/21). Interestingly, while men rarely mentioned themselves as the planners and monitors of relationship (4/21), a number of women described their partners as leading the way in sustaining their connection (9/21). Carol, for instance, tells of how her husband Keith's attentiveness to their growing distance between them led him to sign them up for ballroom dance lessons.

[They were] good because couples can get away from each other: you get so busy with your life and you work.... Even when we may have disagreed about certain things, there was always an attempt to stay connected... What do I love most about Keith? Is that Keith has never given up on us. I would say that Keith has been the

one that's really put so much into keeping our marriage vibrant... If it's initiating sexual encounters, if it's changing things up to make it more intimate, he's been the leader and I love that about him. And that's kept us connected. He always recognizes when we need to reconnect.

In my sample, both women and men discussed the importance of monitoring the temperature of the relationship. Marlon tells me, “I do a lot of self-checking myself to make sure that I’m doing that. If she has a complaint about something that I haven’t been doing, I’ll listen to her and work toward changing it, so that she notices that... I think emotionally I want to make her feel secure”.

### **III. Interpreting problems and differences in emotional engagement**

While most partners counted closeness as a relationship strength, at points every couple faced challenges in maintaining their sense of connection. As they narrated the history and evolution of their relationships, partners also told of instances where connection had broken down. The top three issues partners mentioned creating distance in their relationship were feeling uncertain of how to help them through a problem (22/42); feeling neglected and lonely (13/42), and wanting more disclosure (11/42).

There were gender differences in the kind of problems men and women saw as undermining the relationship. In contrast to much of the existing research, more men (8/21) spoke of feeling lonely or neglected in the relationship than women (5/21). Men also emphasized how feeling manipulated could create distance with their partner.

Women, by contrast, were more likely to focus on how breakdowns and misunderstandings in communication create distance in the relationship. The challenge mentioned most frequently (9/21) wasn’t feeling like their men weren’t open to sharing, but rather that each misunderstood the meaning of what was being disclosed.

Consistent with previous research, more men in the study described struggling with revealing and speaking about their emotions. Surprisingly, men were more likely to bring up how their significant others needed to work to get them to open up and reveal their feelings as a problem and point of disconnection (13/21), than women were to complain about it (5/21). However, unlike previous research, men who expressed resentment about being asked to share were in the minority (4/21). Instead just over half of the men (12/21) talked about how being pressed to articulate their feelings had benefitted them in their relationships. Men's general receptiveness to engaging in self-disclosure in my sample may be why only a minority of women mentioned getting their men to open up as a problem (6/21).

One challenge similarly echoed by women (10) and men (9) was feeling uncertainty about adequately providing their significant others with the support they needed. Men mentioned a number of scenarios where they'd felt ill-equipped to offer their partner the support needed, ranging from post-partum depression or the premature birth of a child, to loss of job or parent. For women, the sense of feeling ill-equipped to offer support often revolved around instances when men were facing challenges at work or job insecurity.

Jolene: I think the toughest things for him as a man... where he hasn't been confident in his job or in his role. And I think I'm like average women who, ya know, a career is important as well, but they don't internalize it around their ego and their pride. So when things weren't going well for him at work... he has a hard time letting it go or working through it without it kinda consuming him.

*[Int]: And so how do you negotiate that?*

Jolene: I leave him alone.

*[Int]: And how did you learn that was the way you could best deal with it?*

Jolene: I think... you realize the more you ask questions, "What can I do?" it just doesn't get anywhere. Women want to talk it out; they just want to silence it out... If I can tell he's kinda in the mood, I may ask, "Hey, how you doing, everything alright?" If he is ready to talk, he will. And if not he might say everything is fine. I know he's not telling the truth, but he will eventually come around and say, "Yeah this was bothering me."

In moments like this, women spoke of working to assure their partners that they were “there” even as what they offered in practice was space to be alone.

When partners explained differences in how they and their significant other engage emotionally, they relied more on gender-neutral language around personality or family background than gender-coded language about innate differences in emotionality.

Reflecting on differences in the emotional openness between she and Will, Tiara says, “It’s just too much work, knowing who I am, you know what I mean? Like who wants to do all of this again? ... The whole getting to know you...it’s just not my personality. It’s a lot of work”. Noting how opening up about personal thoughts, fears and feelings was often much harder for her, she attributes their differences largely to issues of personality. In a similar fashion, describing his challenges with opening up, Greg, an attorney married 15 years says:

It’s a partnership. It’s a love affair. And it’s definitely a work in progress. ...I keep working at this. Things aren’t easy. And I mean, it partly, it’s personality. I realize there are things I need to work on. So again, I’m a private person... I think over the last few years, I’ve become more and more open.

In this case, there was a gendered pattern in the seemingly neutral ways in which men and women described themselves. Men were likely to characterize themselves simply as being “private” (8/21), a description that largely mirrored how women described men who struggled with articulating their thoughts and feelings (8/21). There was no consistent pattern for women, although they tended to rely on language about individual ability (e.g. I can’t, It’s not who I am, I’m just not made that way). Partners also emphasized the importance of family background as a lens for understanding their partner’s behaviors.

Kristian: I think that um, you should try to understand the background of how a person was raised and how you were raised in order to understand why they think like they do and why you think like you do and then see if you can't come to either accept 'em or help them to see a different way so it, it's, and then above all to communicate.

While most respondents drew on gender-neutral explanations, some did still attribute differences in emotional engagement to gender, particularly in terms of speaking about feelings. For instance, Andrew, a construction worker notes:

You know when stuff gets heavy – we [men] get overwhelmed and we shut down, like totally shut down. We don't mean to close up all the time, but it's like we don't know how to open up to you in the same way... It's like we can't, just can't always touch on our feelings and then other times, trying to explain all that? We don't know how to get in touch with our feelings. We just ain't use to dealing with our emotions that way, you know? It's hard.

Consistent with previous research, men were more likely to speak of struggles with disclosing feelings and thoughts; just under half (10/21) spoke of women being better at expressing and engaging with emotions. In contrast to previous research, however, the men I interviewed seldom relied on discourses about the “naturalness” of women's ability to care or nurture or men's inability to engage with feelings. Instead, they drew on more nuanced, historically situated explanations, emphasizing the significance of differences in how men and women are raised.

Eddie: You know we're creatures of the environment that we come up in. And my father's father was very, very strict and as far as he's concerned, this is what a man's supposed to do ... By him learning from that, this is what he passed on to me. Alright? So I become a part of the same cycle of thinking. You know, this is men don't cry, men are supposed to be strong, men don't show no weakness, men don't show any emotion. That's all relegated to the women.

These accounts of gender differences underlined how men and women had developed different levels of comfort and familiarity with discussing or working through emotionally tense issues given differences in socialization as opposed to any innate

emotional capabilities. Recall, for instance Jolene's comment above that, "Women want to talk it out; [men] they just want to silence it out".

Overall, I found partners in my study drew on more gender-neutral ways of interpreting intra-couple differences in how they managed emotions, largely by referencing differences in personality and family upbringing. In contrast to previous research, when gender was invoked it was largely referenced in conjunction with differences in socialization, not in terms of differences in intrinsic abilities for emotional engagement.

### *Discussion*

*Those couples that seem to be strong, they work together... that's what they have to be partners... You gotta be real partners. ~Ruth, retired, 27 years*

In comparison to previous research on carework in intimate relationships, individuals in my sample presented a more complex and varied portrait marked by considerable overlap in men and women's expectations, management and experience of the emotional dimensions of their relationships. There are a few issues that might shed light on some of these differences.

On the most basic level, the variation I underline in this chapter is partially an artefact of taking a different analytical approach where I actively looked for both similarities and differences across and within gender groups. Secondly, spouses in much of the extant research are often depicted as starting their marriages on different pages in terms of their emotional expectations and experiences, and as a result, trying to modify and integrate greater closeness in the relationship over time. The tension and dissatisfaction prominent



in previous research may reflect the stress and confusion of trying to break old habits and incorporate new ways of engaging in the relationship (Rubin 1983; Schwartz 1994).

The men and women in my sample, by contrast, seldom spoke of trying to incorporate intimacy later in their relationships. Instead, most told of how mutual disclosure and share emotional engagement were cornerstones of their relationship. Similarly, partners in 2/3 of the couples spontaneously characterized their relationship as starting on a foundation of friendship, often describing how they'd married because they felt their partner to be their best friend. Describing how he supported Amber through the surgeries and chemotherapy necessary to fight brain cancer, for instance, Shawn says:

I just think that's what we do. I don't think we thought about doing anything else. It's like I said, it's your best friend. I don't think I was like, this is my wife and this is why I'm doing it. It was just like that's your best friend, and that's what you do because you know your best friend would do it for you. I supported her, because that's what we do.

Friendship was not just emphasized among younger or highly educated, cosmopolitan couples. Jonathan, 76, and Ruth, 74, for instance, were the oldest couple in the sample and both in their second marriage. Married for 27 years, both were high school educated and held working class jobs before retiring. Friends since they were teenagers, they'd rekindled their relationship talking with each other about their feelings and sensitivities, as both were working through recent divorces, as Ruth tells me, "His brother came to me and asked me would I talk to him, you know, because we always had a free relationship where we could talk about anything. You know, we were real friends. We are friends, real friends." One marital counselor who'd been practicing for more than thirty years emphasizes the benefits of friendship:

I think] the more honest you can be in a relationship the better it is. And one thing your data will tell you is that when the folks who have been happily married, the reason they've been happily married is because my spouse is my best friend. So, so if we look at how we deal with our best friend, we tell our best friend almost everything.

*[Int]: Do you think folks are approaching the relationships with that understanding in mind?*

I think a lot of folks don't even think about it. All they know is I'm in love with you, I see this gorgeous woman, look good, smile look nice, who got great passion, that's all we look at sometimes. And we don't always look at them as a friend. Ideally the conversation you have when you first start dating, you should do just as much listening as you do talking and sometimes more listening than talking.

While friendship might not be a necessity for all couples, what the counselor underlines is that a relationship founded on friendship is likely to put a premium on openness and disclosure. With that foundation, the kind of mutual disclosure associated with intimacy is, in a sense, built into the relationship. Finally, heterosociality may also have been more common among the men and women in my sample. More than one third of the partners (17/42) spoke of having an opposite sex best friend or very close friend. This was particularly true of those under 45.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I've offered an overview of some relational patterns around closeness and intimacy among the men and women in my sample, positioned in relation to prominent patterns in extant research. The dominant portrait paints men and women as emotional polar opposites. Existing work tends to emphasize women's dissatisfaction with their husband contribution to companionship and how women get the shorter end of the emotional stick. As others have argued, that tendency seems to lead to a caricatured image of men, women and intimate relationships. I underline how the preoccupation with

comparisons and even more so differences *across* gender, with much less discussion of variation within gender or overlap between them, provides an incomplete portrait of couple dynamics (Barnett and Rivers 2007). In order to avoid that pitfall, in my analysis I was attentive to differences *and* similarities, both within and between genders – an approach that allowed me to better understand when, how and in what ways gender matters (Shields 2000: 22). Overall, the men and women I interviewed painted a very different picture than the dominant narrative around emotional asymmetry. My findings are more consistent with research that acknowledges both gender differences and overlap in men and women’s desire for intimacy and attempts to sustain connected relationships (Lauer, Lauer and Kerr 1990; Orbuch 2009).

#### **Chapter 4 - No big I's and little you's: Avoidance, confrontation and the production of we-ness**

*Partnership is good, but another way I think about it is oneness... there's just this natural oneness or understood part of things... eighty percent of our decisions are already there, It's just we know each other well. I know what he's going to respond to and not respond to, so that's a big one: Oneness. ~Jolene, banking, 12 years*

*Look, we work because we allow each other to be our own persons. I really allow Nathan to be Nathan. I don't like everything he does. He don't like everything about me either, but we allow each other to be who we are. He still curses. I don't like it, but it ain't gon' change and it's not worth fussin. You know, it's like respect. He does his thing and I do mine. ~Angel, marketing, 27 years.*

The characterizations of their relationships offered by Jolene and Carol both tap into a second facet of connection – interdependence. Variably conceptualized as *togetherness* (Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1995), *coupleness* (Parker 2000), and *we-ness* (Gottman 1999), individuals' ability to identify themselves as part of a couple, rather than emphasizing their independence, is often hailed as a vital trait in intimate relationships (Buehlman et al. 1992). Studies suggest a strong sense of we-ness is positively associated with marital quality (Burke and Stets 1999), satisfaction (Veroff et al. 1995), and increased trust (Gottman 1994; Gottman and Silver 1999). Conversely, Buehlman et al. (1992) find spouses low on we-ness may feel lonely, isolated and disconnected from their partners as if they're living together, but have parallel lives. Couples with low we-ness may also have difficulties communicating about problems because they lack a shared perspective – at times evading each other to avoid talking about those problems (Carrere et al. 2000).

In their seminal piece, “Marriage and the social construction of reality” (1970 [1964]), Berger and Kellner characterize marriage as a “dramatic act in which two

strangers come together and redefine themselves” (1970: 53).<sup>25</sup> In that transformation, couples engage in a discursive process of shifting, combining, and re-tooling some of the individual frames they bring to the relationship and so create a “new reality” (Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1995). The authors suggest all couples engage in *some* constitutive process of shared identity development. We know, however, that all couples don’t develop a strong sense of togetherness. How do we understand the varied salience of we-ness, togetherness and interdependence in how a couple sees itself?

“Our acts of emotion management are not randomly distributed across situations and time,” Hochschild tells us, “they are guided by an aim ... to sustain a certain ideal self” (2003: 130). Building on this insight, we can read partners’ co-constructed acts of emotion management as attempts to maintain a certain ideal of who they are as a couple. Nancy and Evan Holt’s oft-quoted “upstairs-downstairs” narrative in *The Second Shift* (1989), for instance, does more than obscure tensions about lingering gender inequities. In characterizing *how* they managed marital arrangements (e.g. splitting housework by location), they simultaneously offered a portrayal of *who* they were (an egalitarian couple). Thus, exploring the emotion strategies couples use to manage interpersonal tensions offer a window into their sense of shared identity.

Drawing more heavily on analysis of the joint interviews, in this chapter I explore couples’ co-constructed narratives to elucidate their “couple ideal” - and the salience of interdependence within it. Broadly speaking, I ask: What kind of emotion work is needed to sustain different understandings of couple identity? And, how do different emotion strategies influence the production of we-ness and by what means? My analysis suggests

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<sup>25</sup> Research suggests a couple’s sense of unity is increased when they develop cognitive interdependence and a shared representation of self-in-relationship (Agnew et al. 1998; Aron et al. 1991).

that divergent approaches of avoidance and confrontation in how couples engage in marital conversation and negotiation can create different potential for the discursive production of we-ness.

*Adapting to you, developing us: Couple identity and “perpetual problems”*

*Asked to identify the most challenging part of marriage, without pause, Amber says, “Adapting to each other”. Considering she and Shawn had faced an injury abruptly that ended his career as a professional athlete and her malignant brain tumor in the first three years of their 15 year marriage and before either was twenty-five, I was a bit taken aback. “Even more than the tumor?” I asked. Nodding Amber says, “All that was hard, of course, but I think we just so leaned on one another, those moments stand out as really solid for us,” chuckling as she pointed her thumb in Shawn’s direction, “Learning to live with that one though, that’s a whole other story”. Nevertheless, when asked what the most joyful parts of their marriage she responds:*

*The biggest challenge I would say for any couple, is learning how to merge the personalities and how to relate to each other... Our personalities are so very different and probably equally strong, but when we bump into each other I think it’s hilarious. Now at the moment it’s not, but once it gets resolved... that’s how you get to know who you are. You yourself, but also together, you know, who you two are.*

“One of the most surprising truths about marriage,” noted relationship scholar John Gottman contends, is that *“Most marital arguments cannot be resolved*. Couples spend year after year trying to change each other’s mind – but it can’t be done. This is because most of their disagreements are rooted in fundamental differences of lifestyle, personality, or values” (1999: 23). One partner who’s perpetually late and another who’s a stickler for time? One partner who’s a bit obsessive about cleanliness while the other thrives in clutter? One partner who’s reserved in conflict and the other effusive and confrontational? The work of navigating these “perpetual” problems (Gottman 1999) are ones from which no couple – old or young, gay or straight, newly married or long-lasting – is exempt. As one relationship expert I interviewed put it:

You lived a certain way in your life growing up with your family... then another person comes in and says well you don't drop the socks on the floor at my house, while the other says well that's what we did at my house. So it's almost like everything that you learned... you have to unlearn to some degree and cater to the other person that you're living [with]. And *that's* where compromise comes in and most people struggle with that.

This may be why psychologist Dan Wile observes, "There is value, when choosing a long-term partner, in realizing that you will inevitably be choosing a particular set of unsolvable problems that you'll be grappling with for the next ten, twenty or fifty years" (1988:13). Although these tensions may be impossible to solve definitively, couples that stay together and do so happily must find ways to manage them and adapt to each other. As Will so aptly puts it, "There is no sort of model. You figure it out with the person you're with if you want to be together".

Buehlman et al. (1992) suggest that couples' idiosyncratic sense of shared identity emerges, in part, from their negotiations to find ways to collectively act and make decisions. Building on that insight, I focus on how partners manage tensions around clashes in personality, habits, and styles of interaction (e.g. affection, communication and conflict). In doing so, I diverge from the tendency in extant studies in emotion management to identify couples' shared identity through the way they manage tensions around gender roles, divisions of labor, and ideologies (Schulz 2011; Hochschild 1989). Although these tensions must be managed in all intimate relationships - regardless of age, sexuality, race or class - they have been little explored in the emotion management literature to date.

### *Data and analysis*

To understand how men and women negotiate struggles in the emotional terrain of their relationships, Thompson (1993) advocates examining interactional processes, probing

“what partners do and how they think and feel about what they do... [to understand how] both partners collaborate to create strategies that reconcile personal and relationship concerns with the realities of life” (565). Couples were not asked explicitly about togetherness or w-ness. Instead, my analysis of couples’ joint interviews focused on their descriptions of recurrent challenges in adjusting to one another – managing clashes in personality, preference, and styles of interaction (e.g. communication, conflict, and affection, etc.). In constructing my analysis, I was also attentive to how they told their stories (e.g. cohesion or dissonance in partners’ perspectives) and their feelings about their adaptation tactics (e.g. exasperated, resentful, detached, proud, satisfied, etc.).

Lamont and Swidler (2014) assert that the analytical aim of their respective monographs, *The Dignity of Working Men* (2000) and *Talk of Love* (2001), was not probing “behavior.” Rather, they characterize their goal as elucidating individuals’ systems of categorization where they “live imaginatively—morally but also in terms of their sense of identity—and what allows them to experience themselves as good, valuable, worthwhile people” (7). In a similar light, I didn’t read couples’ characterizations of how they manage tensions as objective accounts to help me understand their actual relationship behaviors. Instead, I analyzed them as “family displays” - information couples convey to the researcher (and each other) in portraying themselves that reflect both their family practices and their idiosyncratic identity as a unit (Morgan 1996, 2011).<sup>26</sup>

I found that the stories couples told about their methods for adapting to each other’s particularities centered on four themes: *acceptance*, *sacrifice*, *accommodation*, and

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<sup>26</sup> Family displays can be understood as a more general version of Hochschild’s concept of “family myths,” which she defines as “versions of relationship that obscure a core truth to manage family tensions” (1989:19). Despite her emphasis on *obscured* family tensions, whether used to conceal or reveal, the meaning-making revealed in these narratives offer important insight into how couples perceive themselves or want to be perceived (Goffman 1959).



*innovation*. Couples' portrayals varied in terms of their approach to compromise and persuasion, tolerance for conflict, and willingness to engage in marital conversation. I examined couples' "family displays" both *across* and *within* couples, taking their stories and emotion strategies as units of analysis.

Couples drew on multiple frames and stories in portraying themselves. Thus, while the classification schema presented here is a useful heuristic, it is not a mutually exclusive typology of couples. In the discussion that follows, I begin by describing these four types of stories, before turning to how different approaches to emotion management shape the potential for cultivating one form of we-ness.

#### *Portrayals of couple identity*

##### **Acceptance**

*I think the thing is that we allow each other to be who we are.*

*You know, I don't try to change her, she don't try to change me. It works for us. ~Carl*

The first story couples told about adapting to each other offered a portrait of the couple as "accepting" and "tolerant". Recounting how they took each other "as is" and agreed to "live and let live," this narrative emphasized partners' mutual agreement to not try to change each other. The willingness to overlook how each rubbed the other the wrong way was hailed as a strength of the relationship - evidence of respect and care. As Angel said in the introduction, "I don't like everything he does; he don't like everything about me either, but we allow each other to be who we are. He still curses. I don't like it, but it ain't gon' change and it's not worth fussin. You know, it's like respect".

In order to uphold this agreement, couples described how they used avoidance tactics to dodge situations where their unsolvable problems might arise. The best way to manage the routine friction of conflicting personalities, interaction styles, and preferences was the

path of least resistance: avoid those situations all together. As a result, couples seemed to develop no-talk zones around points of contention.

Anna: I don't ask anybody to compromise their principles and he stands behind his principles. But sometimes I ask him to be a little flexible, you know? Be able to see my side of it... he just don't want to give.... But that's who he is, so I accept that. Perhaps what I'm saying indirectly is that I'm not getting my way [laughs]. I think that's what I might be saying, in all honesty.

One challenge of abiding to this agreement of total acceptance, however, was that it left some men and women feeling as if their hands were tied from raising grievances. Their descriptions suggested the very act of bringing up a problem could be construed as breeching the agreement of acceptance, insinuating that their partner change some fundamental element of self. The underlying message: accept me just as I am , period.

Eddie tells me, "It's just too much damn energy trying to sit down there and analyze some damn body. You just have to allow them to be who they are. That makes life easier and it works for us".

In the aim of respecting no-talk zones, some partners used coercive attempts to alter each other's behavior, as Carl describes in our individual interview:

The thing that tugs at me is... I like going to church. I don't have a problem going to church when *I'm* ready to go to church, not when *you* think I need to go to church.... I'm like it's a Sunday; I want to stay home. I've worked hard all week... And she'll use that, which is something that I hate, to try to make me feel guilty...*I have a real problem with that and I have yet, I haven't found a way to speak to her about that.* I understand where she's coming from, I do. But, it's her way of trying to smack back at me about doing something I want... then you're questioning my, I don't know what it is you're questioning, but it's like touching on my guilt...

From Carl's perspective, Danielle was breeching their agreement to allow each other to "do their own thing," using shaming and manipulation to force his hand. Still he concludes with a large sigh, "I just accept that as part of her demeanor. It bothers me, but

I don't make no big issue out of it." Despite repeating he had a "real problem" with her coercion multiple times in the individual interview, he also admits he has yet to bring up the problem. Admissions of "he/she doesn't know that bothers me" or "It's not worth bringing up," were fairly common.

### **Sacrifice**

*It was a big adjustment...compared to my first marriage, this one was here was challenging in the sense that we was two individuals who were independent, but willing to sacrifice to be together. We had to learn each other's ways; we still learning ... that's the most challenging part—going through the day-to-day process. ~Eddie*

The second story couples told revolved around the need to be willing to make sacrifices in order to adapt to one another. Drawing on language that accentuated the value of learning to "sacrifice," "let it go" and "give in" when they were at odds, when couples drew on this story they emphasized a mutual willingness to be giving.

Doug: There's growing pains in marriage. Anybody that step into it, you know, they have to be open-minded that there's going to be differences. There's going to be, you know, arguments... If there's ever a smooth road in marriage, it's not a marriage.

Wanda: You have to learn to let go of some things. It's always a give and take situation.

Despite being explicit about their own individual sacrifices, when men and women drew on the sacrifice story, they were less likely to talk about what they had gained *or* the sacrifices their significant other had made. As was echoed across nearly every account, this story emphasized the imperative of the give and take inherent in compromise. One distinctive element in this story was that compromise is portrayed as fairly zero-sum. There was an almost foregone conclusion that there would be a clear winner and loser; there was little mention of mutual gain.

Somewhat ironically, in order to reconcile the sacrifices they made, couples often described themselves as being “fair” and “balanced” and “keep it equal”. In this regard, they used balance to refer to how they traded off on their sacrifices. In some ways, the assumption of zero-sum compromise seemed to minimize the need for conversing and negotiating; when you know someone has to give in, there’s little need to work together to develop novel solutions. Instead the question before them was - who’s going to give in this time? The *quid pro quo* exchange, however, also presented a catch-22, however. In order to maintain balance according to these terms, partners kept a sort of running tally of what each had given to achieve resolution, which at times become its own source of contention when one partner felt things were imbalanced.

Describing how they dealt with conflict, in this story couples also spoke of needing to “keep it moving,” “don’t sweat it” and “not dwell on it”. Yet, in contrast to the acceptance story, these stories were marked less by an avoidance of conflict, than an evasion of sorting out its aftermath. Asked how they’d come to deal with the ongoing friction between Cynthia’s more scattered, laissez-faire ways, and his very ritualized, regimented organizational style, Wesley says:

Well, we didn’t know what to expect. Cause everyday was such a new thing. Everyday. And I think that’s the key part of it. You know, to go through a relationship together facing everything at the same time and learning how to deal with it...we know it [marriage] cannot exist without some compromise...so we just apologize about how things got started and *then we’d just move on*, you know?

In this story, couples seem to take a hands-off approach to repairing any tensions raised by conflicting personalities and perspectives. There were few descriptions of talking through problems or actively try to repair negative feelings. Instead, when couples

emphasized sacrifice, they described relying on the passage of time to resolve conflict. While this approach didn't foster much cooperation or problem-solving, it did seem to hasten their ability to move past conflict when it occurred.

### **Accommodation**

*You're different people, and you've got to constantly remind yourself that you're different. You're constantly working on making sure that you're accommodating to that person's personality ~Greg*

The third way couples portrayed themselves also emphasized compromise, not as a process of sacrifice, but as mutual accommodation. In accommodation stories, couples depicted themselves as seekers of "balance" and "equilibrium," realized through ongoing conversation and negotiation. While sacrifice was present in this story, partners placed less emphasis on their individual sacrifices and more on their ability to meet their partner's needs.

Bianca: If I don't necessarily feel like doing something my husband wants me to do... At the end of the day, Bianca don't wanna do it... it's not so much about the individual. When you're in a marriage, it's about the other person, what's gonna make you all function as a whole, as a team... for the greater good of the marriage. So, the individual work that I think I do is I try to be mindful of what my husband likes and desires.

Despite the emphasis placed on balance and negotiation, in contrast to the previous narrative there was very little discourse around being "just" and "fair". Indeed, in this story partners underlined their acceptance of the fact even exchange was unreasonable, if not impossible.

Steve: I would say it's a balance. *Not saying everything is going to be even all the time...* I may see three action movies. Then, I might have to sit through a chick flick. Even though I might not like it, I sit through them from time to time.... I'll do it for the greater good. It's not about me. It's not about her. It's about us, the greater good. Things that are gonna help us grow or build.

In the accommodation story, as Steve and Bianca's comments illustrate, couples also emphasized what their actions meant for "the whole" or "the team" or "the marriage," almost as if the relationship was third entity in unto itself. This idea that, "the marriage is bigger than two of us," as Keith puts it, was fairly absent in the previous narratives.

Finally, when sacrifices were described, this story was marked by language that downplayed what had been given up. Instead, the accent was placed on how they seldom had to relinquish their "non-negotiables" or compromise on their "dealbreakers".

Alyna: We talk [it] through, "Alright, honey, what things didn't work for you? What were the deal-breakers," so I'm aware instead of assuming things ... if Marlon wants something, and it's not a deal-breaker for me, okay, cool. I need to do that for him, because that's what makes him happy and vice versa. If it's no biggie for him, and it makes your wife happy, then we'll do that

In order to uphold this agreement to respond to each other's needs, partners described themselves as insisting only on those things that were essential. In some ways, this story painted a rather controlled portrait of managing tensions. There was seldom discussion in this story, for instance, of how couples dealt with instances when *both* felt they were compromising their "dealbreakers," beyond a general description of compromise.

Karen: We only had one television, and he loves sports, I'm not a sports fan, so for the first year we had one television and we used to have to compromise on who was going to watch what when... we never got into no argument about it, but we both had to give some... John and I very seldom argued [long pause] we wasn't even good for a good argument.

John: We still don't argue -

Karen: - No he [laughing] he don't know how, he don't fight.

Like John and Karen, in this story couples tended to characterize themselves as "laidback" and "easy," rarely arguing, but instead having "strong debates" or "heated discussions".

## **Innovation**

*It's almost like two businesses merging, but keeping the same business plan for each individual business... [Instead] you have to find a happy medium that takes the best of both worlds and make something better ~Steve*

In the last story couples told, they depicted themselves as co-constructing mutually beneficial solutions. Drawing on language that underlined how they “work till it’s figured out,” “do it our own way,” and how there’s “nothing we can’t work out,” in these stories adaptation was depicted largely as a process of innovative problem solving, as Ruth describes:

One of our differences is he's a morning person and I'm a night person. So when I want him to say up with me to watch something on TV, I said. ‘Well get you a nap or something’. But we have to kind of compromise on that. But he lets me sleep in... But if I have to get up sometime, he say, ‘Girl get up 'cause our day gotta be starting,’ you know? He likes to do things early in the morning. Well, if he tells me ahead of time then I'll prepare myself and I'll go to bed early.

Compromise, in this story, was seldom described in terms of sacrifice. Rather, couples emphasized how they worked to find and create ways to co-exist - *without* having to be apart. In this portrayal more than any other, there was an explicit emphasis on fostering togetherness.

Almost the polar opposite of the acceptance story, in this narrative couples emphasized a staunch unwillingness to let issues go unresolved; they prided themselves on being frank and honest, “holding nothing back”. Likely as a result, these stories were also the most rife with descriptions of persistent tensions. Recounting their ongoing tug of war over time, for instance, Shawn tells of how he and Amber struggled even to make it to pre-marital counseling sessions, “It seemed like every time! She’s late to something and I’m a big stickler for time so I get anxious, ‘We’re late. Let’s go. Let’s get it.’ I think that’s because

me being a professional athlete ... if it starts at eleven, get there at ten fifty. So we've learned to adjust to that, what's Shawn's time [long pause] and what's Amber's time". Yet, over the years they'd developed methods for coping with this difference.

Amber: Time is our big thing; ninety percent of our arguments start with time. Okay, so we'll leave around two and at one forty he wants me in the car so he can close the door. *It's not two!* It's one forty. It's not two o'clock, so I'm not ready. Then the anxiety levels start to get up here [raises hand above her head]. You said you wanted to leave at two. Then he goes run errands and go get gas so when he comes back we can go.

Shawn's anxiety about being on time and Amber's for having the full allotted time to get prepared without being rushed – which tends to make her later still – are both respected in the compromise they've negotiated.

These stories describe an almost endless amount of negotiation and debate in learning to adapt to each other. Yet, that banter was marked largely by amusement and laughter. Instead of seeing conflict as counterproductive and something to be avoided, the accent was on mutual growth, how they were re-shaped both individually and as a unit. As Jolene sums it up, "You just have to understand no one's perfect and everybody has things that are going to drive you crazy, get on your nerves... It should be mutual opportunity to build and to grow together".

Looking across couples' portrayals of who they were and how they adapted to each other, I found two different approaches to the emotion management of interpersonal tensions – collaborative confrontation and allied avoidance – which fostered and hindered a sense of togetherness, respectively. I describe both approaches below.

### **Collaborative confrontation: accommodation and innovation stories**



In accommodation and innovation stories couples described addressing conflict and tensions head on, treating adapting to each other's differences as "an ongoing process" as Steve describes.

*[Int]: How did you learn how to adjust to ... the way [your] temperaments are different?*

Steve: Trial and error. Messin' up a lot - you got to... you're not going, in my opinion, not gonna get it right. And it's still a work in progress. But you're not gonna get it right until you mess up a few times... But you start learning that other person even more... her temperament may change or what have you, mine may change. So it's a progressive science of learning the person and what they think... it's an ongoing process.

I call this approach of working through perpetual problems via deliberate and sustained marital conversation and negotiation, *collaborative confrontation*. Couples that emphasized the need for collaborative confrontation seemed to have a greater appreciation for engaging in the marital conversations needed to develop consensus. Their efforts to construct mutually satisfying strategies also seemed to instill a sense of pride and accomplishment as Shawn describes:

It might even be our, I don't wanna say arrogance, but our personalities are such that I think *we* think we can figure this out, not to the point that we have all the answers, but if we want to do it, we can figure out how... when we figure it out we know it's *our* answer. I don't think we would look at another couple and say they know how to do it better. Maybe they have a piece of advice, but an entire relationship? [shakes head no]

Partners' efforts working together, negotiating and re-negotiating solutions and compromise, helped foster a couple identity marked by interdependence and we-ness.

In stories that revolved around collaborative confrontation, couples drew on some of the same feeling rules that informed the carework for cultivating intimacy, like emotional transparency and committing themselves to hear hard truths. For instance, Ruth notes, "I think one of the main things is that ...what bothers me about him, I can tell him, you

know? Without him hitting the ceiling and he can tell me. And sometimes it, it kinda hurts, you know, because you thought you was all that and a bag of chips and then you find out sister you ain't doing so good." Likewise, Jonathan says, "There have been a couple times that she has done something like that and it really gets on my nerves, you know? But, you know, that's no big thing... You know we can talk like friends, although we're man and wife...we don't have anything we can't work out."

Finally, reflecting on Berger and Kellner's transformative notion of couple development, collaborative confrontation stories emphasized how each partner and the relationship changed over time. This evolution is well illustrated in Tiara and Will's descriptions of their "radically different" ways of engaging in conflict.

Tiara: So my philosophy is better to get it out. My family, we're raw; go hardcore...It's just the dynamics of the family in general. We say what we feel.  
Will: They say what's on their mind. My family is more passive-aggressive-  
Tiara: -exactly, which is irritating. But I think Will's come along [laughs]  
Will: We act in; they act out.

Despite being raised to deal with conflict in a "passive-aggressive" way, over the course of their 15 years together,<sup>27</sup> Will gradually adopted Tiara's approach to conflict noting how now, "*We* are a loud family".

*[Int]: You pointed out in the earlier interview was that your family argues very differently than Tiara's family and so she is boisterous-*

Will: -my God, yeah

*[Int] She engages, doesn't back away from things. How did you learn to navigate that?*

Will: Tiara is the first one that I actually was with through an argument, right? ... When there was an argument nearing, prior to that I would just sort of shut down. So it took me a while to learn that you could be in an argument and still be in a relationship; that an argument could be a sign of a healthy relationship and not the end. I think it took me... just sorta recognizing that relationships are messy.

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<sup>27</sup> I note the fifteen years (4.5 dating and 10 married) because it was how both partners consistently referred to their time together.

Hochschild (2003) tells us that “[W]hen an individual changes an ideological stance, he or she drops old rules and assumes new ones for reacting to situations, cognitively and emotively. A sense of rights and duties applied to feelings in situations is also changed. One uses emotion sanctions differently and accepts different sanctioning from others” (99).<sup>28</sup> People often use reframing strategies to develop alternate frames for a situation or new sets of feeling rights and obligations. In adopting Tiara’s conflict style, Will not only shifted his actions, but reframed his understanding of what was appropriate to feel. These new “feeling rights” are reflected in his admission that, “Eventually I was screaming right back with her,” having grown comfortable with more fiery and direct engagement of conflict.

### **Allied avoidance: Acceptance and sacrifice stories**

In the acceptance and sacrifice stories couples described a more evasive approach to dealing with their differences – engaging in minimal conversation, avoiding conflict, and agreeing to ignore or overlook unresolved issues. In this approach, which I call *allied avoidance*,<sup>29</sup> couples were more likely to be dismissive of the benefit or need for confronting tensions. Indeed, some described discussion and negotiation not only as unproductive, but at times destructive.

Carl: There’s no point in trying to okay let’s go over what we were arguing about, you know, we don’t even do that.

Danielle: We don’t even do that. No, once it happens, something cools off, that’s it.

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<sup>28</sup> Along these lines, Felmlee and Sprecher’s (2006) claim that while individuals bring a variety of emotional tools into relationships, which shape their perceptions and practice of marriage, they also come to co-construct new narratives over the course of living shared lives.

<sup>29</sup> I term this *allied avoidance* to highlight Zerubavel’s (2007) insight that from a sociological lens, denial in relationships “usually involves more than just one person... we are actually dealing with ‘co-denial,’ a social phenomenon involving more than just individuals... Co-denial presumes mutual avoidance” (47).

Carl: if I say something that may have hurt her or if she said something to hurt my feelings, we might deal with that...that's it, you know? We don't have to go into no deep, deep conversation about it because it would probably ... just wind up starting all up again, you know? We have our arguments and we have some big arguments... I walk off and, you know, cool off. ... And then the next day we might get on it but usually we just *keep it moving*, you know?

Both "letting it go" and learning to "keep it moving," were effective strategies for keeping the

peace, avoiding seemingly unnecessary conflict.<sup>30</sup> As Rob notes:

We still got some things that we need to work on, but... Those things that kinda go into the Pandora's box. Close that box. Don't let them in there. And they come out every now and then... With me, if it's gonna have a negative effect, I - I rather ain't talk about it. I've dealt with so many other things... Whatever it is. That's just one more thing I just push to the side.

If collaborative confrontation was more consistent with feeling rules that fostered intimacy, strategies of avoidance, dismissing and suppressing feeling, and normalizing trouble characteristic of allied avoidance seemed to work more towards helping couples maintain a sense of independence.

*[Int]: One of the things that Eddie mentioned during the first interview was there are moments when he doesn't want to talk about his feelings...he said sometimes "I just don't want to deal with it". How do you deal with that in your relationship?*

Sharon: Ok ya know I'm gonna be honest with you, I don't. When he doesn't want to talk about it I try but there is no sense in constantly [being] on him to make an argument ok? So when he doesn't want to talk about it I just drop it. Something that's not resolved.

*[Int]: And are those things that you typically come back to at some later point if he's really to talk about it you'll talk about it or you just kinda let things go?*

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<sup>30</sup> The avoidance of unaddressed dissatisfaction, however, carries the danger of fostering lingering resentment. "We are almost twice as likely to recall 'unfinished issues' compared with those we have processed or in some manner put to rest. Between loves, arguments that end with confessions, amends, and deeper understanding of one another tend to be soon forgotten...a regrettable incident that goes unaddressed... the hurt remains accessible in our active memory, available to be rehashed again and again" (Gottman 2012: 34-5).

Sharon: I kinda let things go. We may come back and talk about it but it's not gonna be soon. So most of the time I just let it go. I mean he'll say I don't want to talk about it there is nothing to talk about, it's over, done.

*[Int]: Does it feel resolved for you?*

Sharon: Not really, but [shrugs]. I've learned to just accept it.

While failing to return to work through arguments left her feeling some things remained unresolved, Sharon was rather ambivalent about needing to engage further. Partner's mutual stance to "not make an issue of it" suggests they had normalized the presence of some ongoing dissatisfaction. As a result, they were less inclined to express frustrations, to ask for what they needed, or to engage in conversations to resolve underlying tensions. Partners seemed united in the sense that the effort required to smooth out differences just wasn't high on their list of priorities. Finally, rather than transformation, these stories placed greater accent on how the relationship safeguarded their individuality, enabling each one to maintain a sense of independence.

Darren: We don't even travel in the same circles.

Kristian: We're the, I think we the only married couple that spends more time apart than together. As far as doing things-

Darren: Out of the house.

Kristian: We never together. Ever. Hardly ever, ever. And we get it, and it works for us.

Darren: Yeah, I don't want her around, you know ... she crazy. [both laugh]

As Darren and Kristian's exchange underlines, their cultivation of fairly independent social lives should not be confused with the absence of care or love. Indeed when couples relied on these stories they seemed to emphasize how separateness may have *facilitated* care.

## *Discussion*

*Those couples that seem to be strong, they work together... that's what they have to be – partners. No big I's and little You's. You gotta be real partners. ~Ruth, married 27 years*

My analysis suggests that engaging in different approaches to emotion management can create varied potential for couples' perception of we-ness. Engaging in the “false starts and continual negotiations and renegotiations” (Kollock and Blumstein 1988: 481) indicative of collaborative confrontation seemed to facilitate the discursive development of a shared identity. While perhaps inadvertent, the emotion strategies of evading conflict, minimizing challenges and dismissing the significance of tensions characteristic of allied avoidance decreased the likelihood of engaging in the kind of cooperative problem solving and discussion that facilitates we-ness. As a result, the productive potential of ongoing negotiation for fostering a strong display of “we-ness” isn't fully realized, resulting in presentations of couple identity emphasizing greater separateness and each partner's independence.

My findings are consistent with Benjamin and Orly (1996) claims that “open” versus “closed” marital conversations create different potential for the transformation of marital arrangements. Examining how couples negotiate divisions of labor, they found open marital conversations facilitated change because both partners engaged in “a ‘shared’ project and are both willing to engage in new ways of discussing feelings and experiences,” whereas closed conversations “can rarely enable change...as discussion over such issues is by-and-large unavailable” (Benjamin and Orly 1996: 237).

Emphasizing the positive association between we-ness and spouses' evaluations of their relationships as happy and satisfying, contemporary marital researchers often depict a strong sense of interdependence as *essential* for satisfying marriage. For instance, Terri

Orbuch, principal investigator for the longitudinal Early Years of Marriage study contends, “Interdependence is what keeps couples together... if both partners are interdependent socially, emotionally and financially, there is a greater incentive to be together” (2009: 44). Likewise, Fowers (2000) characterizes partners’ ability to see their individual identity as bound up with being part of a couple as one of the “shared goods” of marriage (See also Schwartz 1994).

Holding to this reasoning, we might expect couples who relied more on allied avoidance to be less satisfied. While tempting to draw that conclusion - as I almost did - my analysis of couples’ accounts just didn’t lend itself to that reading. Couples relying more on tactics of allied avoidance didn’t just have lasting relationships, they also described them as loving and satisfying. Even when recounting complaints and grievances, allied avoidance stories were seldom told with contempt or resentment. Instead, they reflected a mix of frustration, nonchalance... and a great deal of humor. While allied avoidance wasn’t beneficial for fostering we-ness or interdependence, nor did it seem to undermine couples’ sense of satisfaction or contentment.

While less commonly acknowledged, other researchers provide a different perspective on the necessity of interdependence – highlighting how this ideal type reflects only one way for structuring satisfying relationships (Weigel and Ballard-Reisch 1999). Fitzpatrick’s typology of couples (1988), for instance, identifies three types of marriages - *traditional*, *independent*, and *separates* - varying along the three dimensions: conventional ideology, autonomy required, and manners by which they confront conflict. The *separates* in her analysis approached their interactions a way that’s very consistent with allied avoidance: demonstrating an uninvolved communication strategy, avoidance

of open conflicts and not sharing a sense of togetherness. Yet, Fitzpatrick doesn't portray these couples as being in danger or having problems; they were content with the degree of interdependence in the relationship. Similarly, building on Raush et al.'s (1974) typology of *validating*, *volatile* and *conflict-avoiding* couples, Gottman (2014) comes to different conclusions than those suggested in the earlier work. Raush predicted that volatile and conflict-avoiding couples, whose characterizations resonated with innovation and acceptance narratives in my sample, wouldn't last. Yet Gottman finds that all three types of couples were stable and content – not only the more even-keeled validating couples, whose interactions seemed to echo the accommodation stories told by couples in my sample. My analysis is more consistent Fitzpatrick and Gottman's findings – some couples simply don't desire or require a strong sense of togetherness. Despite the emphasis placed on interdependence in marital research, if these scholars research is any indication, perhaps what's significant isn't the amount of interdependence and independence in a relationship, but *alignment* in partners' needs and expectations for togetherness. Couples in my sample that emphasized avoidance seemed just as united in their needs for interdependence as those who relied more on confrontation - which may speak to why they're still together.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I shed light on how in cultivating ways to adapt to each other and integrate lives, couples aren't simply constructing rules to co-exist, they're also constructing the couple as a unique entity. In developing habits and practices for negotiating differences, partners not only learn to co-exist, they also settle upon tactics



that characterize what “we” do as well as who “we” are. Undoubtedly, the negotiation of conflict is just one way couples can cultivate a sense of togetherness. Still, by zooming in on one mechanism through which we-ness emerges, my analytical aim was to shed light on how varied emotion strategies might shape the unfolding of that process. In that effort, I tried to highlight how varied degrees of interdependence require different kinds of strategies to maintain.

Despite the popularity of ideas that couples need interdependence for satisfying relationships, my findings are more consistent with research that emphasizes *variation* in the balance of interdependence and autonomy couples require. The model of highly integrated and interdependent relationships has gained a cultural hegemony in our understandings of what makes for a good couple. Perhaps one of the most important insights of my analysis is the reminder that intimate relationships are not one-size fits all. Some require intense passion, others insist on equal partnership and friendship. Still others need a deep sense of stability and security. Couples’ needs and priorities vary not only across couples, but *within* each one over the course of relationships (Sternberg 1998).

## Chapter 5 –When things fall apart:

### Emotion work and dilemmas of strained intimacy

*With Steve coming from more of a stable environment... it can be a little shameful... opening up about growing up [with an alcoholic mother] and some of the trials and tribulations... being able to just be completely vulnerable was a little bit of a challenge. ~Bianca, personal coach, 11 years*

*It's the perception of being weak. ... [So when] you want to know what's going on with me it's so embedded in us not to talk about it 'cause the way we was taught through grandfather, father, and so forth. "Boy, stand up. Be strong. Don't you cry" ~Eddie, postal worker, 25 years*

When women and men in my study described what helped them feel a sense of closeness with their partners, they emphasized efforts like offering each other mutual disclosure, attentiveness and emotional support echoing previous research (Cordova and Scott 2001). Yet as the men and women quoted above illustrate, the carework which they attributed with sustaining closeness was not always easy to offer. For some, like Bianca, the carework needed to stay connected conflicted with beliefs about managing feelings steeped in “enduring vulnerabilities” from their family background (Karney and Bradbury 1995). Others, like Eddie, underlined how patterns of socialization that encouraged emotional closure could stand at odds with practices of intimacy. When one partner experiences the carework needed for closeness as weighty and challenging, the potential for developing emotional closeness in the relationship is compromised. While there’s no uniform level of emotional closeness needed for *every* couple, if desires and expectations for closeness *within* a couple are misaligned, it can give rise to loneliness, neglect, inadequacy or resentment. How do partners’ reconcile these feelings?

How spouses use emotion work to manage dissatisfaction with closeness and intimacy has been a central question in previous studies on the emotional dimensions of

couples' relationships. Research has illustrated, for example, how spouses (typically women) do emotion work to suppress negative feelings (e.g. resentment or anger), rationalize their partner's inability to engage, or emotionally disengage seeking attention elsewhere (Duncombe and Marsden 1993; Schulz 2011).<sup>31</sup> Doing this emotion work on themselves helps spouses reconcile negative feelings about the relationship with desires to avoid conflict, portray a happy marriage or sustain love for their partner. Emotion work done by the dissatisfied partner, however, represents only half of the story. While extant research often depicts spouses who don't emotionally engage (typically men) as unconcerned with intimacy, some men *would* prefer to meet their partner's needs. The problem, as Bianca and Eddie reveal, is that conflicting socialization and life lessons can leave them feeling unable to offer the carework closeness requires. These partners often face two dilemmas. First, how do they reconcile loving their partner with knowing they also make them feel neglected or dissatisfied? Secondly, how do they reconcile contradictions between social expectations of marriage suggesting they *should* engage in the emotional engagement and disclosure that fosters intimacy, when conflicting beliefs and emotion norms suggest they should not?

In this chapter, I explore how men and women use emotion work to manage their feelings when closeness broke down between them. More specifically, I look at how individuals draw on "framing strategies" in these situations, which enable them to re-interpret an emotion or the cultural meaning of a situation and the emotions it evokes (Hochschild 1983,1979; Thoits 1990). Broadly speaking, I ask: how do individuals reconcile tensions around intimacy in their relationships? What kinds of situations do

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<sup>31</sup> As a reminder, I follow Erickson (2011) and use the term "carework" to refer to acts of support and care to maintain the relationship and "emotion work" for individuals efforts to manage their own feelings.

they believe require emotion work and what contradictions do they need to resolve? How do the strategies they employ directly or indirectly impact closeness in the relationship?

This chapter makes a few contributions to our understanding of individual level emotion work. First, to avoid the pitfalls in previous studies assuming gender differentiation, I present one alternate non-gender centric approach to analyzing emotion work. More precisely, moving away from partners' comparative evaluations of intimacy, I focused instead on situations of disconnection, looking across all accounts for instances where partners described feeling misunderstood, unsupported or neglected – regardless of which partner felt that way. In displacing gender, I was able to shed better light on similarities and differences between and within gender groups. In doing so, I illustrate how men also engage in emotion work in support of the relationship, contrary to the depiction in previous studies.

Secondly, taking a different approach also helped me examine a broader range of situations where people felt intimacy broke down and the varied strategies used in those situations. In doing so, I found that beyond using emotion work to reconcile dissatisfaction with the partner or relationship, they also used it to manage feelings about their *own* actions that undermined closeness. At the core of this second use of emotion work were conflicts between what intimacy required and previously held norms and beliefs around emotional engagement – an area rarely explored in previous studies on emotion work.

#### *Extending our conception of personal emotion work*

As mentioned in the introduction, there are a number of ways research on emotion work in the private sphere needs further development. When it comes to examinations of

the emotion work individuals do on themselves around emotional closeness, our picture of couples' dynamics is rather incomplete. Surveying the literature left me with a few questions that serve as the backdrop for this chapter.

*Are all the men unemotional?*

To date, there has been little interrogation of men's perspectives on emotion work – both in terms of their desires for emotional intimacy or what it takes for them to feel those desires are met. First, the comparative approach in most studies offers insight on men's perspective as compared to women, but it doesn't give us much insight into variation and nuance among men's perspective when taken on their own terms. As a result, we know very little about if and what men *do* desire in terms of closeness. Without knowing what they desire or feel is lacking, which might prompt them to do emotion work, it's hard to evaluate the kinds of emotion work *they* do in support of the relationship. Secondly, Hochschild has characterized emotion work largely engaged to help people bring conform to social norms – which for men remain steeped, at least in part, with the masking of emotions (1989). In a lesser known article, Duncombe and Marsden (1998) argue, “[men] also do emotion work in relationships to conform to the ideology of ‘being a man’”. However, we would suggest that since men's emotion work appears to be primarily *on themselves*—‘in their heads’—and is devoted to *suppressing* rather than expressing emotion, it is not surprising that to their wives they appear emotionally remote” (213). Ironically then, it may be particularly when men actually *are* engaging in emotion work to conform to gender norms that they appear least involved in it – adhering to socially expected displays of unemotional, stoic silence. Thus, we might

ask whether or not men do emotion work on themselves when they feel closeness or intimacy has been negatively compromised?

*Are all the women defeated?*

A second challenge with existing studies is that analysis of individual emotion work has been largely limited to the ways that *women* alter their emotions to sustain the relationship. Hochschild (1983; 2003), for instance, suggests that wives draw on strategies like belittling their own input, reducing their husbands' obligations to tiny symbolic tasks, and suppressing negative feelings in order to present a happy portrait of coupledness. More recently, Schulz (2011) found that American women married to men in high power careers worked on their emotions to rationalize and justify the critical lack of "couple time" in their relationships. This assertion that it's mainly women who work on their feelings to sustain the relationship, while men are free not to, suggests a fairly uniform portrait of desires and power in couple relationships: women desire closeness, but men don't. This portrayal seems problematic in a few ways.

One critical issue that's seldom interrogated in the literature is that the couples most frequently referenced from Hochschild's work on marital relationships represent only 1/3 of her sample – those whose gender beliefs and ideologies are at odds (Hochschild 1989: 199-201). Yet, research building on her analysis has often taken these couples as the norm from which to generalize about men and women writ large. As result, asymmetry in power, desires and expectations are taken for granted – instead of treated as one possible configuration of couple dynamics. On another front, the dominant narrative in the literature suggests that we should understand emotion work largely as a tool of the powerless – where women are, by default, the ones lacking power. We see that reflected

in how the emotion work done (largely by women) to maintain stability or reduce conflict is characterized as evidence of “false consciousness,” “a matter of denial,” or at best, some form of “intuitive genius” (Hochschild 1989, 2003; See also Delphy and Leonard 1992). Yet, the characterization of women who do emotion work to maintain stability or avoid conflict as evidencing false consciousness strikes me as problematic. It suggests a lack of agency and that they’re acting against their own self-interest. Yet, if they’ve chosen to prioritize stability and peace over equity, or in the case of my study intimacy, are they necessarily working against their self-interest or is their ranking of priorities just out of line with (researchers’) social expectations? Or perhaps a better question – are all trade-offs reflections of powerlessness? Is there a way to think of emotion work in a less polarized manner?

A broader view of relationships might take as its premise that *both* parties have needs and expectations of the relationship. Thus, either might find their needs failing to be met along some dimension of their relationship. In this case, either partner might find themselves needing to do emotion work to reconcile contradictions between the reality of the relationship and their expectations for it. The analysis in this chapter is taken from this wider vantage point.

### *Analysis*

Contradiction, sociologist Anita Garey (2011) tells us, lies at the heart of emotion work. “The researcher’s observation of emotion work is the recognition that a contradiction exists... This contradiction becomes a tool of analysis, pushing her to ask, ‘What is it that needs to be reconciled?’ and ‘Why?’” (178). Thus examining instances when individuals do emotion work is a key way to elucidate places where norms, beliefs

and lived experience come into conflict. To that end, I examined accounts looking for instances when men and women spoke of desiring more closeness, as well as statements about feeling misunderstood, unsupported or neglected.<sup>32</sup> I attached codes like “feeling alone” “misunderstood” “neglected” and “handled with manipulation” to quotations that indicated feelings when connection broke down. Examining individuals’ explanations and accounts of how they dealt with those moments, I looked for patterns in the kinds of problems they seemed to be working through in moments when intimacy broke down and the strategies they used to manage them. I attached codes like “just too hard” and “learn to deal with it” to quotations when partners justified why they or their partner was unable to be closer. I attached codes like “worth the risk” “do more for him/her” and “what friends do” to quotations about framing strategies that helped them shift perspectives or behavior to increase closeness.

Broadly speaking, I found three types of dilemmas that prompted partners to do emotion work: dissatisfaction with the significant other’s emotional engagement; failure to live up to their own standards for engagement; and inability to meet a partner’s request for closeness. We can think of these dilemmas as leading people to do emotion work in one of two directions - outward directed (managing feelings about their partner or the overall state of the relationship) or inward directed (reconciling feelings about their own actions or inactions). Outward directed emotion work is the kind that’s been most discussed in previous studies. Its aim was largely *conciliation*, finding a way to make peace with ongoing dissatisfaction with intimacy in the relationship. Inward directed emotion work, by contrast, attempted to mediate some personal contradiction partners felt

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<sup>32</sup> These instances reflected what Hochschild might call *magnified moments*, “episodes of heightened importance, either epiphanies, moments of intense glee or unusual insight, or moments in which things go intensely but meaningfully wrong” (2003:16).



between pre-existing norms or beliefs around appropriate engagement and what developing closeness asked of them. In those cases, emotion work was geared towards one of two ends: *motivation*, to change their actions or perspective in order to better connect with their partner or *justification*, to account for their own actions. In the discussion that follows, I draw on a few vignettes representative of the emotion work done in all three cases. In each case, I highlight the conflict or contradiction that motivated them to do emotion work, as well as the strategies they drew on to manage it.

### **Outward directed emotion work**

#### *Conciliation*

The first dilemma that prompted people to do emotion work was when they felt connection was undermined by their significant other's action or inaction (e.g. lack of self-disclosure, coercive actions, absence of emotional support, etc.). In each case, men and women described some feelings of disappointment, loneliness, anger, or frustration.

One strategy partners drew on to make peace with less closeness than desired was to assess their partner's emotional engagement through a narrow frame of reference. We see this, for example, in Sharon and Eddie's relationship. Describing her 25-year marriage with Eddie, Sharon tells me that they seemed to have gotten closer over time, "I think it's easier as time goes by because right now, I think, Eddie and I we have a more open dialogue with each other [long pause]. We kind of know where each other is coming from. I think." Like many of the wives depicted in previous research, Sharon felt like a big part of the challenge in closeness between she and Eddie was founded on his struggle or unwillingness to talk much about how he felt. "I mean, sometimes I wish he'd talk to

me more,” she laments in our individual interview. Sharon describes Eddie’s limited disclosure as a longstanding feature in their relationship, although early in the relationship she hadn’t realized how much he kept from her. She’d thought early on she had a good understanding of who he was. Going to marital counseling in their seventh year of marriage, after his infidelity and a one-year separation, disavowed her of that belief:

*[Int]: Do you think you had a good understanding of him, who he was how he was, what he needed?*

Sharon: Probably not. Because if I did I may have had second thoughts about me marrying him. I may have [had] second thoughts about marrying him if I really did understand who he was. But I mean Eddie and I just dated for two years before we got married, so that’s not really a long time [long pause] to get to know someone...

*[Int]: Do you think he understood you? And who you were?*

Sharon: Probably not. I think it was a physical attraction in the beginning. I think he grew to love me because when we separated, what did he say? He says to me, “I love you, but I’m not in love with you”. What, what do you mean? Okay, so I says, “Okay, whatever”. So um yeah.

Later in the interview, comparing Eddie to her brother-in-law who Sharon says, “Tells Annie [his wife] everything, Everything”. She continues, shaking her head, “You know they’re just two years apart, but they’re night and day, night and day. Anyway, I shouldn’t do that. They’re different, really different. And it’s not all bad you know.” In order to reconcile the tension between loving her husband with accepting they might not ever develop the closeness and mutual understanding she thought they should have, Sharon draws on a strategy echoed in other research on couples (Hochschild 1989; Ortiz 2011). Sharon doesn’t evaluate the current state of closeness in their relationship in terms of the intimacy she desires or compare Eddie to other men she knew who were close with their wives. Instead, she sets a different baseline, comparing him to earlier versions of himself. When she compared Eddie to other men who she knew and admired in their

closeness with their wives, she was left disillusioned. Confining her comparison to their early years of marriage, she's able to see him through a lens of growth and evolution, framing the relationship in a more positively light.

At other times, however, Sharon's feelings of disappointment with closeness in the relationship still came bubbling up. In those instances, she drew on another strategy to make peace with their relationship. Characterizing Eddie's personality as fixed, "You know that's just how he is. That's not gonna change. I mean, I suppose I've got my things and he has his", she worked on convincing herself that change wasn't an option. Thinking of his personality as immutable seemed to offer Sharon a justifiable rationale to stop, or at least lessen, her attempts to push for change in the relationship.

Another way of setting a point of comparison that cast a situation in a better light was to compare situations to the worst-case scenario. Cynthia, for instance, tells of how she'd reconciled Wesley's infidelity early in the marriage, because he kept it hidden.

Cynthia: My sister once told me that...she said, you know, I would never divorce a man. And I do believe that. She said I would never divorce a man because he had an affair. ...I would never divorce him for that reason. I said, "Whoa, you wouldn't?" She said, "Nah." She said, "Because those kinds of things happen. They happen".

*[Int]: Do you agree?*

Cynthia: I was agreeing till it happened to me [laughs]. Until it happened to me... But before, I thought as long as he keeps it away from me, it's okay. Why do I care?...Just don't disrespect me. Don't have anybody calling my house. Don't go staying out, not coming home, don't do any of that stuff...and he didn't. I know women who'd have the side woman calling the house and raising all sorts of hell. Not that. Never that.

Cynthia would have preferred for him to be faithful, but when she compared their situation to relationships where cheating was blatant, his discretion allowed her to find a way to deem the affairs tolerable. Comparing the situation to the worst case scenario seemed to lessen the severity of the affront, helping her retain a sense of dignity.

Whatever the current trials were, they weren't as bad as they *could* have been. This

strategy was particularly prevalent in cases when the source of couples' disconnection was some form of hurt and betrayal.

Another way people made peace with situations when their significant other's action undermined closeness was to compartmentalize those actions. In this case, they framed the intimacy-undermining act or behavior, even when recurrent, as exceptional in the broader context of the relationship. This tactic was most commonly used in instances when they felt their partners were trying to manipulate or coerce them. We see this illustrated with Aaron and Joy.

Driving me to their house for their individual interviews, Joy and Aaron fell into a conversation about her request for them to start attending church or some other spiritual service together. The rationale, as Joy explained it, was her concern with making sure they ended up together in the afterlife. When Aaron expressed ambivalence about that prospect, given their different spiritual beliefs, she asks, "Are you saying you don't want to be with me in heaven Aaron?" As if scripted, both of them turned to look back at me as if to say, see what I've got to deal with?

For Aaron, it was Joy's masked intentions that undermine their connection. When he felt she used "emotional dishonesty and coercion," he would shut down, often becoming dismissive and detached. Following up on a comment he'd made in the joint interview about not liking to feel "handled," I asked if he was suspicious of her motives. "I am. I just—I do it and I try to—I get upset and I say, 'I'm not going that way.' ... She's always testing me. She likes to do that for some strange reason". He described Joy's constant seeking of affirmation as a persistent aggravation early in their 27-year marriage. Still, over time, Aaron said he'd come to be less judgmental and more empathetic about her

actions. He attributed that shift largely to a more nuanced understanding of the roots of her “fragility and insecurity,” which he saw as motivating her constant need to be reassured of his care:

She went to school every day because she was going to be judged by these white girls in that environment. I know that’s an important issue, but it was hyper for Joy because Joy went to college impoverished...she tells me the story that she didn’t even know what a tampon was and she has this giant box of Kotex. She was so profoundly embarrassed by being poor among these rich white girls, profoundly embarrassed. Smarter than anybody [and] embarrassed.

Prompted by this understanding of her past, Aaron seemed to re-frame her actions in order to lessen his resentment and annoyance. More precisely, he compartmentalized her affirmation-seeking as abnormal and an outlier in the greater scheme of their otherwise deeply intimate relationship.

*[Int]: So, to this issue, you said ...she expects certain particular responses of affirmation.*

Aaron: Affirmation. Absolutely need it.

*[Int]: And you also said that a lot of her personality has been shaped by the particular conditions of poverty, not just economic...*

Aaron: And the absence of—the absence of affirmation... So, I’ve got to fix that shit. I love her, but she probably couldn’t sleep last night thinking about what I might say to you ... I told her I could care less about your perception of our relationship, but it means something to her... [before] it would’ve been hard for me to even entertain that. I just now accept that it has some relevancy for her and that’s important, and that’s it.

*[Int]: How did you come to that acceptance? What changed?*

Aaron: I have greater compassion and I would think greater love for her. It’s an expression of love. Would she think that? No, I don’t think so.

Unlike Sharon, Aaron’s re-framing didn’t normalize Joy’s habit. While he empathized with the conditions and experiences that sourced her sense of insecurity, he did not absolve her of responsibility for changing her habits. He recounted multiple instances of calling her on manipulative and coercive actions, underlining their negative impact on

their relationship. The willingness to take her backstory into account, however, helped *him* not to withdraw as much when those moments occurred.

One last strategy partners used to manage dissatisfaction was lowering their expectations and shifting their attention away from the relationship for a bounded amount of time. Steve, for instance, emphasizes his loneliness during a period when Bianca's new position had her working long hours, which he remembers as "maybe six or eight hours out of the day, to you may only see them thirty minutes out of the day". He recalls this period as being very lonely.

*[Int]: So in those moments, or that time period of feeling lonely, what were you able to communicate about that feeling? Or were you able to communicate how you felt?*

Steve: I believe I was communicating those, those, too much. It was around a work issue... To me, I was working for the job at home. Okay, close the laptop, and let's watch a movie. And if the laptop was closed, be here... You know, if the laptop wasn't open, she was falling asleep. There's just so much there she put into something that could be gone tomorrow, when I'm trying to stay around for the rest of your life. So I was trying to communicate that it just didn't seem like it was taken in [by her].

*[Int]: I believe you said there was a sense in which you felt kind of neglected, at that point?*

Steve: Oh yeah. Definitely, I would say yes.

Telling of how he managed that time, he told of trying to ignore the distance and to distract himself in her absence.

Steve: I mean, it was her first big job and she was the only black woman in the division, so she was kinda like, trying to prove herself. She wanted to succeed. But at some point, you know, I started to resent it. It's like are you married to the job or to me? But at the same time, I didn't want her to feel bad – it was ... It was kind of rough at times. I tried not to pick fights – I didn't always succeed [laughs]. But I missed her ... it was rough.

Steve describes developing new hobbies like getting involved in local football league and volunteering at church. In those environments, he tried to present a good face. He

says he was always trying to “hype her up,” he liked to brag about her and her work. But he still recalls the time as deeply lonely, “You now I kept trying to tell myself that, it’s not forever, it’s going to end”. Knowing that the first year was the hardest in her field, Steve focused on the endpoint. He told me how he literally counted down the time until that year eased up, distracting himself and trying to mask his displeasure. Steve’s comment underlines how men also crave emotional intimacy and want greater companionship.

These strategies like applying a narrow frame of reference to evaluate the relationship or a partner’s actions, compartmentalizing behaviors, and normalizing behaviors like the inability to disclose echo previous studies on how spouses cope with their dissatisfaction around intimacy (Duncombe and Marsden 1993; Mansfield and Collard 1988). One strategy frequently mentioned in previous research that wasn’t found in my sample, however, was emotional disengagement into totally separate worlds (Hochschild 1989). Not only did men and women speak to me of their frustrations, their significant other’s often mentioned how those feelings had been voiced as well.

### **Inward directed emotion work**

#### *Motivation*

The second dilemma partners faced around the breakdown of intimacy revolved around how they saw themselves standing in the way of closeness. In these cases, emotion work often revolved around trying to reconcile some contradiction in some action they’d taken and their perception of what they should’ve done – particularly in

their role as spouse or partner. Often, that perception of letting down their significant other persisted even though they knew their partner didn't interpret things that way.

One strategy for reconciling such contradictions was re-framing one's understanding of their role in the relationship. We see this with Carol and Keith's relationship. In our individual interview, Keith tells me how Carol's emotional bonds with her friends had left him feeling resentful at some point in their relationship:

I think in my own mind I had like some resentment about Carol and her girlfriends and how they reacted; discussing all kind of stuff that men don't do. Well, I couldn't definitely see myself discussing my wife with other men these issues... 'How's Carol?' 'Fine.' That's it, you know? No more.

From Keith's perspective, spouses were supposed to offer each other a sort of emotional loyalty and exclusiveness.

Keith began to develop a new perspective after experiencing one of the lowest points in their lives – losing their only son unexpectedly in a car accident. “Well, for me it was like devastating ... aside from his death. You know, I had a very difficult time with her, all the crying.” Having prided himself in being able to deliver, to fix whatever Carol needed in the past, he notes, “You know, I go into the Keith mode and I want to take care of this issue. And then when I take care of the issue, I felt like I'd done my job, you know?” With no way to “fix” the situation, and already struggling with his own mourning and grief, he was overwhelmed with how to cope with hers. Although Carol recalls him being the strong one, holding her up during that period, he tells me, voice trailing off, “As far as being able to comfort her, I was not able to do that sufficiently.” It was in that period that he became grateful for Carol's friends and the support they gave her.

Keith: I had thought, like, she has a lot of friends that [she] spends time with.



Carol: Who?

Keith: You... You have friends that you spend different times with. And at certain periods, I had some resentment to that, you know? [Like] You don't really need them people. But when it came down to it, if it wasn't for those friends, I wouldn't have survived; I wouldn't be here now...

Keith was able to shift his perspective by reframing how he understood their roles, particularly relaxing the boundaries of his own as husband. More specifically, rather than thinking of spouses as needing to be each other's *sole* of comfort and support, he began to re-frame spouses as each other's *primary* source. No longer interpreting Carol seeking nurturance elsewhere as evidence of emotional disloyalty or of his failure to be her sole support, also helped relieve the sense of inadequacy Keith felt early in their period of mourning, which he described as pushing them apart. "But through like different comfort—I say like women, they were able to get us through that period. Now whenever she wants to be with them and all that, it doesn't bother me".

Bianca illustrates another motivation strategy, in this case to help her reconcile the contradiction between knowing marriage required commitment and her belief that someone from a background like hers wouldn't be able to sustain a relationship. Early in their relationship, that limiting belief had shaped Bianca's ability to work through rather than flee conflict:

I remember right before we were in Atlanta, we had our first huge argument. And I got so mad that I actually got in the car, and was driving to my sister's house in Chicago - from Atlanta to the Chi, right? Who does that? [Int laughs] ... And when I went back to the apartment, Steve sat me down. He was like, "Why is it, every time we get into an argument, you wanna up and leave?" And he made me realize that I didn't have very good coping skills when it came to conflicts and relationships. Because I wasn't used to being committed... I remember doing the "sista girl" [waving her finger in his face] and telling him, "You don't have no ring on this finger". And he was like, "Do I need a ring on your finger to be committed to you?"

Bianca describes her reaction to arguing with Steve, doing the “sista girl” and accusing him of not being committed, as a protective measure. Contrary to the stereotype of men fearing commitment, Bianca put the brakes on the relationship using the absence of a ring as a crutch for not facing her *own* fears of attachment. Steve’s insistence of commitment without vows or symbols forced her to revise her vision of commitment. “When he said that to me, it was a big wake-up call... he let me know that he was committed to me at that point, without the ring”. Still it took five years after their engagement to marry Steve. Her official story about the delayed marriage was busyness: graduating from college, going to graduate school and taking her first corporate position. But reflecting on that period, she says:

Subconsciously, [I thought] I could not sustain a marriage, because my background... my mother more so, was very dysfunctional when it came to relationships. So neither [of] my parents were married. And in the communities we lived in... you didn’t see a lot of healthy, functional black relationships... subconsciously [I] thought I wouldn’t have what it takes to sustain a marriage.

For Bianca to overcome her insecurities and fears, she had to re-frame how she saw her relationship with Steve in a way that minimized the risk. Specifically, she focused more on Steve as her best-friend than as her fiancé and future husband. Recalling her revelation while attending a friend’s wedding, Bianca tells me, “I remember sitting there halfway through, thinking to myself, why aren’t I married to Steve? You know, he’s my *best friend*. And I didn’t have one valid reason to why I wasn’t married to him”. Having had a male best friend since high school, she already had proven skill and ability to sustain friendships. While marriage was unknown and frightening terrain, reframing their relationship to emphasize friendship allowed Bianca to trust in herself enough to finally commit despite her fears of attachment.

Another strategy that helped people foster closeness was revising their understanding of the significance of their actions to the relationship. We see this, for instance, in Doug's willingness to be more forthcoming with his opinion about family decisions instead of stoically "just dealing" with Wanda's decisions in order to appease her. Recounting how they'd come to choose their house, for instance, Wanda tells me that Ron went along with her choice, expressing how much he disliked it only years after buying it.

Wanda: *We* were going [house hunting]. That's why I was asking you. I was like, let's talk about it. He can show us more houses. We'll eventually find one that we can compromise on that we can both like. ...[turning to me] He do not like this house. Had he just said no, let's not move here. I woulda said, okay, let's keep looking.

Doug: To this day. To make her happy.

Wanda: Yup. Trying to make me happy. I'm like—

Doug: I'll make whatever. I'll make whatever sacrifice I gotta make.

Doug understood his role as provider synonymous with a willingness to make sacrifices; his personal wants and desires were immaterial if they stood in the way of what was best for the family. Probing that moment in our individual interview, I asked if he'd gotten to a point where he was more forthcoming about his wants, he said, "I'll give in ninety-eight, ninety-nine percent of the time. I say, okay... I can adapt to anything... I'm gonna be alright. I'm gonna find a way". Still, Doug's perception and approach came to shift, as it he recognized that refusing to offer his opinion was making Wanda feel unsupported. Going along with what she said didn't reinforce her sense of his strength or ability to provide, nor did it make her feel pleased; it made her feel alone. Doug worked to shift his perspective, so that offering his opinion became part of his role.

Doug: I just know, if she asks me something, she's not gonna ask unless she wants it. So, I just wanna say, I don't care, yeah, okay, I don't care.

*[Int]: Because you know she wants it if she, if she actually ask for it—*

Doug: If she ask, she wants it... And if she wants my opinion she'll say, "What do *you* think about this?" Which is pulling words other than, I don't care about it.

Okay, what don't you care about? What don't, *what* don't you care about? She'll pull it out of me; then I'll start talking.

In this case, the contradiction for Doug was steeped in not wanting Wanda to feel alone, yet understanding his role as husband and provider as doing whatever was necessary to provide, largely in stoic silence. "It ain't easy always, you know, I'm not no complainer. But it matters to her, you know? I'm still gonna do whatever to make sure they're good. But it matters to her, so I'll tell her what I think"

Another strategy individuals used was to create cautionary tales to remind them of how certain behaviors had undermined closeness in the past. This is well illustrated by Dawn, who said in her 15 year relationship with Alan, she'd had to overcome defensive behavior that had been normalized in her first marriage. Having come out of a high conflict relationship, she told me how the slightest critique or comment from Alan created a knee jerk response to defend herself. In her experience, intimate relationships had been battlegrounds, which was the polar opposite of how mild-mannered Alan engaged in relationships. She described that defensiveness as fracturing closeness between them early in the relationship, "It seemed like every time things would start to settle and we'd get closer, he'd say or do something, anything really – and I'd strike out. I'd want to fight and argue – and he don't, you know he don't really fight much. It wasn't him, it was me, fear". Having left a relationship where she'd characterized the dynamics like this, "Look, you hurt or get hurt. And at some point I decided it was enough of me bein the one hurt," the challenge was refraining from striking out defensively. Dawn's reflections underline how tactics that were once protective could become hindrances in the context of a different relationship. She describes learning how to engage in conflict in ways that didn't aim to wound:

We were just careful not to attack each other's character or say things that would really hurt you. Cause he would always say some things you can [forgive] it, but you can forget, but you're not gonna forget some things you can't take back after you say. So when we would argue, we just kind of wouldn't go too far. Or just wait, and then calm down, and then come back. So, I think I learned that from past experiences, you know?

Without a clear model for how to do things differently, the work of engaging differently was often trial and error. "I think I wanted to do things differently, but I wasn't really sure how. Because you have those past voices coming back. And so every time I would get a past voice, I would try to do the opposite." She described how at some point she'd just started to remind herself that she had do the opposite of what she'd done in her previous marriage because she didn't want that kind of relationship and she didn't want to continue creating a wedge of distance between her and Alan. By reminding themselves of these pitfalls and missteps, some partners were able to avoid reverting back to habits that were more familiar, but destructive to the bond between them.

### *Justification*

The last dilemma that led partners to do emotion work was when *they* were on the receiving end of requests for greater closeness – and felt unable to meet those requests. Often underlying that sense of inability was a contradiction between actions needed for greater closeness and some pre-existing life lessons, belief or norm that encouraged conflicting behavior.

We see one suggest justification strategy with Doug and Wanda. In the joint interview, both were adamant in presenting honesty and transparency as being at the foundation of their relationship, repeatedly telling me they talked about *everything*:

Wanda: The part about the good, everything good about marriage, I think we're there... We can have the TV on for hours and never watch it, cause we're there just talking about any and everything. Just laughing and talking about any and everything.

Doug's individual interview, however, suggested there *were* some no-talk zones. He told of how he avoided speaking about his dissatisfaction with both their physical and emotional closeness. He described Wanda as distant, a quality which he traced to her past sexual trauma. Seeing his role as protecting her from future pain, he'd decided never to pressure her to talk.

*[Int]: Did you try to help her through? And if so, how?*

Doug: I tried as much as she would allow me to. You know, she didn't wanna talk about it a lot of times, 'cause it brought back memories. So I didn't talk about [it] unless she wanted to talk about it... I would be careful about my questions, cause I wouldn't wanna trigger anything that would upset her.

Sensing that some professional counseling might help both her and the relationship,

Wanda asked him to attend counseling with her. Doug adamantly refused, explaining:

To this day, I'm... I can say this on the recording: [leans down to speak into the microphone] *I'm never gonna do it*. She wanted to go to counseling. And I said, I don't need counseling. You do. Why should I go? I don't have a problem. You do.... I can't help you unless you wanna help yourself... No matter what I do, you're not gonna be happy with what I do until you make yourself happy. I say and, by that, I can't be there. ... I might be a block. That's never helped.

Doug reasoned that his presence was unnecessary and could even be harmful, causing a "block" in her progress. However, he kept justifying his refusal with no prompting, emphasizing how he didn't need counseling, Wanda needed to "choose" happiness, and repeating over and again "It's your problem". The repeated justifications pointed to some underlying contradiction that he was trying to resolve. As he continued, he also revealed his discomfort with sharing his *own* feelings.

Cause they gonna ask me how I feel. It's like, it don't matter how I feel. This is about how she wants to feel... Nope. That marriage counseling? Nope. None of that.... I said, I can't. I said, you know what. All your problems, all your issues, gotta handle them yourself. Wanna talk to me about it? I'm right here.... I said,

but that's something you gotta deal with... Cause it's your issue, your problem. It's you.

Initially, it seemed that for Doug the dilemma seemed to reflect a tension between wanting to protect Wanda and his discomfort revealing himself and his own feelings in counseling. His staunch resistance to counseling, even though it might help Wanda *and* did in fact represent her taking a step to making herself happy, seemed out of character for someone so outspoken and vigilant about providing for his wife. Later he revealed how he counted not being able to help her or “fix” her as one of his greatest disappointments.

*[Int]: How does it feel to be in this place where you know she's still - whether it's hurt or fear or anger - she's still [stuck] there? And you can't-*

Doug: That, that bothered me, because I had so much confidence in myself. I felt like I could fix anything. You know, anything and anyone. You know, if they allow me. And she wouldn't allow me... I haven't stopped trying, but [long pause] I figure, if I keep up with the compliments, nice things, you know, just giving her a smile, you know, a little caress. I, I caress her every day.

Doug's description of his sense of inadequacy in not being able to “fix” things for Wanda is spoken gingerly. The tension between wanting to support Wanda and the exposure of revealing himself to a stranger was a challenge. Throughout the interview, he'd characterized himself as incredibly self-reliant, joking that if dropped in the jungle – he'd come out wearing chinchilla. Yet, listening as he returned a few times to his regret around not being able to “fix” things, it seemed a greater dilemma was how counseling would spotlight his inability to live up to his perceived role as protector. To reconcile that contradiction, Doug worked to emphasize counseling as being solely about Wanda – her issue, her problems, her counseling. Accenting the singular nature of counseling and presenting himself as immaterial to how it unfolded, it becomes outside the purview of

his responsibilities as husband. Moreover, presenting his presence as a hindrance meant that by staying away he *was* protecting her – in his view preventing the potential for more harm.

Another way of justifying emotional distance was to minimize the significance of whatever quality being closer might yield (e.g. understanding, shared perspectives, etc.). We see this for instance with Eddie, Sharon's husband, who was explicit about the challenge of revealing his feelings, "Sitting down and expressing what's going on with me... You know, as much as she tries to tap into me, sometimes I'm not there. I'm not open for that, you know?" He echoes that point when he offers his accounts of their experience in marital counseling. "I [knew] that ... for us to get back together, I had to open up and I did, you know, but I wasn't thrilled about it". The difficulty, as Eddie described it, wasn't just resistance to discussing their problems with a stranger. He also felt anxiety about how it would require him to expose himself and to discuss feelings. Later in the interview he traces his anxiety about revealing emotions to how he had been raised:

I have a hard time with feelings. We have conversations sometimes, arguments, debates, whatever...she wants to know what I'm thinking, what I'm *feeling*, and sometimes I don't feel like going there... *maybe because sometimes it hurts and as a man*, I don't like showing it. I learned that if a man shows his feelings that he's weak and that's part of the rugged side... It's not that physical pain. *It's that emotional pain that gets to you* ... That emotional pain it's like...you'd rather be whipped.

For Eddie, there's a conflict between his wife's desire for him be more open and the way he's been taught to think about how men engage with emotions – which is mainly by masking them. In some ways, Eddie's comments echo research on hegemonic masculinity and the way boys are socialized to mask emotions (Connell 1987; Messner



1993; Franklin 2004) and how men often struggle more with verbalizing feelings than women (Powell Hammond 2012). The challenge, as he describes it is not simply about displaying emotion or verbalizing feelings being unfamiliar, he characterizes allowing himself to feel altogether as painful.

With norms around marriage and intimacy suggesting that emotional openness is normal between spouses and those around masculinity suggesting that his feelings should remain masked and unspoken, Eddie faced a contradiction in feeling rules. Unlike Doug, Eddie doesn't negate or dismiss Sharon's request, he acknowledges that failing to share more sustains distance between them. Instead, he re-frames the value and significance of one outcome of opening up – understanding. “No matter how long you've been [together], you can never figure out a person... I don't need to understand”. By minimizing the significance of understanding as a relationship quality, he lessens the importance of offering the disclosure it requires. Moreover, he doesn't just say he can do without understanding her; he also depicts himself as fairly indifferent to the fact that he doesn't think she understands him.

Eddie: Yeah... I'm a very complex man. I am a very, very sensitive person if you talk about certain subjects.... I'll cry at a drop of a hat and that's my mother's side. The other side is my father's side. You get me heated, you got to pop him [imitates punching someone]. And I try to keep a balance with both sides... sometimes she just doesn't understand me.

[Int]: *Still?*

Eddie: Still. *Still*. Twenty-six years, she still just doesn't understand me. [laughs]

Because getting Sharon to understand him would *also* require his disclosure, he emphasizes how he doesn't need to be known. While Eddie's proclivities may well reflect less of a need to be understood *or* to develop a deep understanding of Sharon – the dilemma arises because he knows that *she* wants more closeness and a deeper

understanding of him, which he can't consistently provide. In this case, the contradiction reflects a conflict between life lessons to avoid disclosure and the sense that in order to please his wife and create the socially expected engagement with intimacy, he *should* be more open. Reflecting on how opening up further could positively impact their relationship, near the end of our individual interview, he tells me quietly, "We could be closer".

Ultimately, emotion work in these cases worked to rationalize, legitimize or justify continued action or inaction – largely by re-framing the quality their partner wanted more of (e.g. understanding, closeness, support, etc.) or minimizing their significance to efforts that could better connection.

### *Discussion*

Unlike previous research that shows women as the ones primarily engaging in emotion work in support of the relationship, I found both women *and* men engaged in emotion work to make peace with dissatisfaction with the relationship. In accounting for why spouses, usually women, worked to make peace with ongoing dissatisfaction, previous studies often emphasized power differentials (e.g. women unable to leave because they lack material means), assumptions about the naturalness of men's lacking emotional capacity, as well as ongoing love for their partner. I found that people rationalized their willingness to make peace with dissatisfaction by emphasizing how their partner's behavior stemmed from some enduring vulnerability from their past or a deeply entrenched personality trait (e.g. Aaron's explanation of Joy's constant search for affirmation). In these cases, despite frustration and disappointment with their partner, they're also willing to give them the benefit of the doubt.

My findings also leave me questioning the intimations of false consciousness often raised in these studies. The men and women in my study seemed very conscious of the fact that they were choosing between trade-offs. Additionally, as I underlined in the previous chapter, people can have very different needs in a relationship. What's essential for one couple or partner may play a much less prominent role in the priorities of others. The tendency to characterize instances when women prioritize a stable marriage or peace at the home as false consciousness rests on an unspoken assumption that their self-interest is necessarily measured by a standard of equity. Yet if there are other aims and qualities topping their hierarchy of concerns, strategies to de-emphasize the need for equity may well be *in* their self-interest. I wonder if we should exercise more caution in making those assertions or finding a less objectifying way to highlight how individuals make peace with negotiating competing needs and desires.

Beyond using emotion work to manage dissatisfaction with their significant other, people also worked on trying to reconcile how *they* had negatively influenced closeness. This second kind of dilemma manifested in two ways. On one hand, closeness broke down because one person felt incapable or unwilling to meet some emotional demand. On the other, partners sometimes felt like they themselves hadn't emotionally engaged the way they wanted to. In both cases, people seemed to be trying to manage situations where they felt pulled between conflicting emotion norms. Hochschild tells us that different feeling rules can "contend for a place in people's mind as a governing standard with which to compare the actual lived experience" (2003: 100). I found that occurred in two ways. On one hand, carework to develop closeness (e.g. disclosure, emotional support, etc.) stood at odds with other norms about how to emotionally engage, usually

due to gender norms (e.g. women are nurturing, men don't cry) or a social role (e.g. actions of a "good" husband, protector, partner, etc.). On the other, a situation invoked two appropriate but conflicting versions of the same role (e.g. husband as protector/fixer or husband as emotional supporter). In these situations, the emotion work partners did on themselves served or worked to shift their own perspectives or alter behaviors that they saw as undermining their ability to feel fully connected with their significant others. At other times, however, feeling unable to do what closeness required, they found ways to rationalize or justify their actions.

While I found that both men and women engaged in emotion work in support of the relationship, I did note some gender differences. There still seems to be some dissonance between intimacy and male gender norms in at least two ways. First, for some men there was still reticence around disclosure and revealing their feelings. While most of the men in the study spoke of the benefit of having their wives as confidante, a few mirrored previous findings of men as being less emotionally experienced. Where the study differed from previous research however, is that the men here didn't feel *incapable* of being open and speaking their feelings, they just described it as being uncomfortable and a challenge. Perhaps more significantly, I found that men did more struggling with the meaning of gender roles. Those contradictions were mainly around their understandings of what it meant to be husbands. The associations of husband with traditional definitions of hegemonic masculinity- providers, protectors and fixers – were very persistent.

One final finding merits mention. It wasn't just men who struggled with doing the kind of carework that fostered closeness. Women also faced their *own* challenges beyond grappling with their partner's emotional tendencies. This finding challenges the

monolithic portrait of women as being emotional naturals and experts in the process of cultivating intimacy. I will return to that topic in much greater depth in the following chapter.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter offers a glimpse into varied situations that caused partners to feel disconnected from one another – and the emotion work they did on *themselves* to manage those occasions. I focused my analysis on different situations when closeness was undermined and the emotion strategies used to manage those moments. I also shed light on how both women and men experience dissatisfaction with the nature of closeness *and* how both do emotion work on themselves to reconcile contradictory feelings around intimacy.

Students of emotion work have frequently traced the emotion work of framing men and women use to reconcile dissatisfaction in the relationship around dynamics like gratitude, fairness in division of labor, and time spent together (Hochschild 1989; Duncombe and Marsden 1993; Schulz 2011). Beyond that aim, I show how they can also do emotion work to mediate their own internal conflicts between contradictory emotion norms. To this end, my analysis suggests that not all emotion work is oriented towards negatives ends – obscuring difficulties to portray “everything is happy”. Instead, there is also productive potential in emotion work – helping partners to cultivate changes in their actions or perspectives that facilitate closeness in the relationship.

## Chapter 6 - Closeness and Cautionary tales: The challenge of resilience

*“You’re a woman now. You’ve got to think about yourself, your work. Always keep you own bank account. If you have a man around, you don’t know if he’s going to jump up and leave and you’ll be stuck with four or five kids” (Hochschild 1989:131).*

In *The Second Shift* (1989), Hochschild writes of how Anita Judson, a working class black wife, was offered these words by her mother on the night before her wedding. Having worked two jobs as a domestic to keep Anita and her siblings afloat, this wisdom she offers to usher her daughter into womanhood is what Hochschild calls a “cautionary tale,” “important episodes from a person’s past that carried meaning for the future” (2003: 128). Reflecting on the lessons she distilled from her mother’s experience and admonitions, while in the midst of an ongoing tug of war with her husband Ray over whether she should continue working, Anita notes:

My mother had it so tough, with no man around, and really for me it was pretty bad... She was really hard, very strict, and that’s affected how I am. I can handle the usual things— being housekeeper, cook and mother – that’s fine. *But having a man around, having to share my feelings with him – it’s hard for me to adjust to that.* Like with my husband right now (Hochschild 1989: 131-132)

The central dilemma for Anita and Ray, as Hochschild frames it, is their conflicting feelings and gendered beliefs about whether or not Anita should keep her job. Hochschild holds up their story as another illustration of how couple relationships have been altered by shifting cultural norms around the meaning of work and divisions of labor home, a shift initiated by the influx of women into the labor market in the 1970s. The presence of working women, however, wasn’t new for Anita and Ray; they’d both “grown up within a long tradition of wage-earning women... to be a woman was to work. That *was* the tradition” [emphasis added] (129). As other scholars have argued, the economic realities

of black men's precarious employment undermined the black couples' ability to develop the separate spheres division of labor of breadwinner-homemaker; it never became the dominant tradition in black families (Hill Collins 1990; Hill 2005, 2006). This begs the question, if a two-job family wasn't a shift from what they knew, if it "was the tradition"— why would Anita working represent a new or unfamiliar dynamic to negotiate? If the collapsing of separate spheres seen as central to gender tensions wasn't occurring because that separation had never been fully established – should we under interpret this couple through the same lens?

As Hochschild rightly underlines, by insisting on working, Anita heeds her mother's warning to stay financially resilient. I would argue that Anita's mother's cautionary tale and the couple's struggle also reflect a second dilemma. Beyond being economically self-sufficient, implicit in her tale was also an admonition that (black) women need to be emotionally self-reliant. A man who goes doesn't just leave a woman financially bereft; he also takes away himself, depriving her of care and support. Anita highlights how past experiences and her mother's warnings had left her feeling ill-equipped to manage the *emotional* demands of marriage: "Sometimes I tell him, 'I can do without you,' but deep down inside there's a feeling that has to break out. I do need him" (132). The emotional safeguards she erected to hedge against the potential of abandonment - not trusting, revealing needs, or sharing her feelings – also worked to undermine their relationship, making it hard for them to develop an intimate bond and connection. Like Anita, more than half of the women in my sample (13/21) recounted hearing similar warnings about the necessity of being self-reliant and not presuming they could depend on others. Several underlined how the enduring impact of those lessons undermined their ability to develop

emotional bonds in their relationships. Their accounts speak to a reality starkly absent from previous studies of emotion work - some *women* also struggle with emotional closeness.

In this chapter, I disturb the monolithic portrait of women as intimacy experts offered in extant research on couples' emotion work. More precisely, I explore how some women found it difficult to cultivate closeness in their relationships due to how they were socialized to be resilient, often being instilled with a feeling that they needed to be wholly self-reliant. While protective in helping them navigate insecurity and uncertainty in their lives, those lessons sometimes presented barriers to cultivating the emotional dimensions of their relationships. Broadly speaking, I ask: How did the emotion norms conveyed in cautionary tales about resilience shape how these women went about developing closeness in their relationships? What emotion work did they do to mediate those lessons when they negatively undermined connection? Another manifestation of the inward-directed dilemma outlined in the previous chapter, I found that some women had to do emotion work to reconcile contradictions between the carework that closeness required and emotion norms cautioning against emotional attachment, dependence, and revealing their feelings. By examining both the challenges women encounter in cultivating closeness and the emotion strategies they develop to offset those beliefs, I argue that some women must do a very different sort of emotion work in support of their relationships than what's typically been documented in the literature.

I argue that at the core of these cautionary tales are lessons about how to cope with insecurity and uncertainty. In this effort, I bring my work into conversation with two bodies of previous research on cultural adaptations to uncertainty: research on black



women's socialization and "survival strategies" (Ladner 1971; Stack 1975; Rose 2003) and recent work on emotion strategies of "doing security" (Cooper 2014) and "flexibility" (Pugh 2015). Drawing on this research, I offer a meditation on how race may matter in our analyses of couples' dynamics. Reflecting on some particularities in black women's experience, I complicate assertions about the newness of America's "new insecurity culture" (Cooper 2014). Ultimately, I suggest that without contextualizing the patterns we observe we might miss how seemingly similar behaviors and beliefs may reflect different relationship processes.

*This woman's work: complicating our perception of women's emotional experience*

As highlighted in previous chapters, extant research on carework sketches a relatively monolithic portrait of men and women's emotional experience. In the previous chapter, I underlined how women *and* men did emotion work in support of the relationship. Here I trouble the depiction of women as natural nurturers and necessarily craving greater closeness. While previous research emphasizes women's dissatisfaction with their husband's emotional engagement, much less considers women's own challenges with cultivating intimacy.

The dominant narrative in research on female socialization emphasizes how they learn lessons that facilitate the development of intimacy, lessons that often begin in the family. Families are commonly held to be the first agents of socialization, and in terms of gender, they pass onto children norms that demonstrate how work, roles, and identities are organized along gender lines (Chodorow 1978; Lorber 2004). Feminists have often underlined how these assumptions about women as innately domestic, dependent, and submissive are central to traditional ideas about womanhood and femininity, contributing

to the how women are seen as a marginal and secondary in society. In a summary of previous studies on gender differences in socialization, Block (1983) reported that parents emphasize daughters are expected to be kind, loving, well-mannered, passive, subordinate and have good marriages. The sense is that caring is natural for women – although scholars have definitely challenged the notion that this carework is necessarily easy (Erickson 2005; Strazdin and Broom 2004).

Some scholars have questioned, however, to what extent and under what circumstances these same patterns of gender socialization inhere in black families, as the way that race shapes social positions may prevent blacks from realizing traditional gender roles (Collins 1990; King 1999). More precisely, some argue that the “traditional” female gender role, marked by passivity, subordination, emotional and economic dependence, never became the dominant norm for black women (hooks 1990; Carother 1990). Black women may have evaded some of the narrow constraints of gender roles because they’ve always shared in the responsibilities of paid work, family, and community (Collins 1987; Landry 2001). Might these differences shape how they engage in intimate relationships? And if so, how?

As highlighted in the introduction, there is a diverse literature on ways that male socialization undermines their attempts to cultivate intimacy (Messerschmidt 1993; Kimmel 2011; Connell 1995). Much less research, however, has examined ways that women too, may pick up lessons that make them ill-prepared for cultivating intimate relationships. I focus on understanding how the socialization some women receive may also negatively shape their ability to cultivate closeness.

This chapter extends the analysis in the previous chapter, focusing on one specific form of inward dilemma some women described around the conflict between carework and emotion norms around resilience. Examining the women's struggles with emotional intimacy, I tried to elucidate the underlying life lessons, norms and beliefs that posed hindrances to cultivating connection. More precisely, I asked: What lessons in these women's emotional socialization posed a challenge for their relationships?<sup>33</sup>

Additionally, how did they think the lessons impacted their relationships? And, what strategies did they develop and employ to mediate those challenges?

#### *Cautionary tales*

*My parents divorced when I was young ...my mother was a single mother...there were certain messages that were drilled into me, which were, you know, you have to do for yourself. You have to be self-sustaining. You can't depend on anyone besides yourself... you've got to be able to, to maintain everything. ~ Jolene*

Several of the women in my sample recounted hearing frequent reminders that they had to be self-reliant and independent. The underlying message in those admonitions was that the only person they should depend on was their self. Like Anita and Jolene, Wanda describes how she'd grown up hearing warnings about the necessity of self-reliance in similar terms. Recounting her relationship history before Doug she tells me:

I didn't really imagine getting married actually, so that actually wasn't on my list of things... that just wasn't part of my thought process as a matter of fact. I think a lot of it was because my mother just hounded in me: you gotta do your thing, be able to support yourself, not depend on anyone, and always, you know, be able to do whatever you want to do.

While her mother was less explicit, Joy described being instilled with a very similar sense of needing to be able to take care of herself on her own.

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<sup>33</sup> This chapter also responds to a common criticism of emotion management research, that despite continuing to argue that emotional cultures source the ideologies and strategies individuals draw on to engage in emotion work seldom do they explain the origins of these emotional culture(s) (Thoits 1990, Stets 2010, Peterson 2006).

Joy: the other thing I wanted to tell you is that every Christmas my mother got me a train set – a train for boy toys. And she said that was because she wanted me to be able to manage things and control things and to be tough.

*[Int]: How do you think that affected how you saw yourself or what you were supposed to do?*

Joy: I was supposed to be, I was supposed to be a breadwinner. I was supposed to be able to do what a man could do. I was not supposed to depend on a man.

*[Int]: And what did that mean for you growing up in terms of you're supposed to do what a man was able or supposed to do, but you were still a woman?*

Joy: Yeah, and I was getting these funny messages – not only [as] a woman, a black woman.

Broadly speaking, women underlined three lessons that they distilled from this insistence on being self-reliant – each of which informed how they engaged in intimate relationships: Don't need or depend on anyone, don't get too attached, and don't reveal your feelings. I detail each these negatively defined feeling rules below.

### **Don't need or depend**

The first lessons women emphasized was being warned to be wary of depending on men. We see this with Rosie, who'd been with her partner Rob for twelve years.

Rosie: I was raised by my mom and my grandmother. There was no man in the house.

Rob: Hence why ain't no man gonna tell you what to do.

Rosie: Yeah... that was my mom. She raised me real independent, independent.

Rob: Very independent to the point where it's sickening.

Rosie: Yeah that was my mom, she just stressed you don't need a man. Anything you need you can get for yourself.

Rosie tells me later in our individual interview, "It's like this – you never know what's gonna happen. And if you don't need 'em, my mom was just always like if you don't need 'em, then if they go you keep on moving. You might hurt for a little bit, but you ain't gonna be, you know, *totally* messed up". Cautionary tales like the one Rosie heard, instruct women to erect an emotional safeguard to protect themselves from the fallout of

failed relationships. They're taught that security comes from guarding themselves from being pulled under by disappointment of a man's departure, by never leaning on him too much in the first place. For some, the takeaway message in those instructions was to temper their expectations of men's provision from the outset. Joy, for instance, was told by her aunts, "You'll never have a man like your uncles," by which she explained, they meant hard-working providers, if in some ways detached.

And you know, Jovonne, I think part of what has happened when I listen to myself talk... My mom was a woman by herself and that, I think, made me think maybe even if she didn't do the best job, that a woman by herself can make it. So I always believed that no matter what, I can make it. If Aaron walked out the door tomorrow, I could make it tomorrow... I have not been dependent on him for bed and bread.

That fear of becoming dependent created deep anxieties in some women about allowing themselves to rely on their partners. Angel described how it took her along time to fully rely on Nathan, "He's never let me down. But it took me long to just really *depend* on him. I think it was, you know, I couldn't stop thinking, this is cool, this is nice, but I was scared to trust it. I wanted to be comfortable and to trust him – him and the relationship. But it was hard, really hard". The challenges Joy, Angel and Rosie describe, speak to deep-seated fears around allowing themselves to trust in the idea of security; it remained an idea that they regarded with some suspicion.

That anxiety seemed to instill a fear not just of depending on men, but around having needs. As Anita described earlier, there was a tension around acknowledging and accepting that she has needs: "I can do without you" yet at the same, "I do need him". As Anita describes it, the act of needing is an admission – one made reluctantly and fearfully. In her essay on the asking rules single mothers use in requesting help with childcare, Karen Hansen (2011) poignantly captures the vulnerability and uncertainty in

daring to ask for help, “Determining when and where to ask, finessing that uncomfortable place between what one needs and what someone else can give, takes practice and judgment. The act of asking acknowledges one’s needs and interdependency” (116). When you’ve been taught emotion norms predicated on *not* needing, the very act of acknowledging one’s needs can be an anxiety-ridden affair. Secondly, asking for help also reveals a sense of faith and expectation in the provision of care. The act of asking says, I think it’s possible and feasible that my needs will be heard, acknowledged and met. Relationship professionals emphasized that to avoid asking for help, people sometimes developed dismissiveness around their own needs that often led them to assume others would be just as dismissive:

Sometimes [they’re] scared that it won’t, won’t matter anyway. I think that one reason ... being defensive also about our needs being, not being met, then it becomes tit-for-tat and they take it personal, they okay, you attacking me, as opposed to saying okay, if I tell him, if I tell her this is what I need, is it going to matter?

Exhibiting enough faith to admit and discuss needs, then, can feel like a risky endeavor.

As a result, some women described feeling ill-equipped to articulate needs in their intimate relationships; the very idea of asking made some feel anxious and out of control.

### **Don’t get too attached**

Another lesson some women distilled from cautionary tales was to avoid getting emotionally attached in relationships. For Jolene quoted above as saying her mother instilled in her the idea, “to be self-sustaining. You can’t depend on anyone besides yourself,” felt those lessons stifled her ability to develop strong attachments in previous relationships. She describes herself as being very detached in relationships before Greg, “I would say the common thread is very little emotional attachment. I was very focused

on what I needed to do, so *very* little [attachment]. I treated them well, respectful and friends... at the end of the day I knew I could just walk away and do what I needed to do. Sounds horrible [laughs]”.

The detachment Jolene describes is a bit unexpected. We might expect it in a case like Bianca and her reticence to marry Steve as underlined in the previous chapter. As Steve explained it, “getting to know her, more of her family background. I think it just came from running... Either something would have her get, pick up and move, if they didn’t like the landlord... They would just constantly, just, leave”. The instability Bianca faced – constantly moving due to evictions and leaving behind homes and friends – made her wary of getting too attached. As one therapist describes, the idea of getting too attached – or attached at all – was often seen as ill-advised:

There are a lot of people who have been single and in single environments where they didn’t *witness* a couple... And with Black and Brown folks, that number is higher than with other people... then there are other people who grew up in a single family where they saw a rotating door, with people coming and going over their life. And what that tells them emotionally? There is something in them [saying], “*You shouldn’t get too connected* to somebody because they are likely to be going...” In that sense, they don’t have good feelings about coupleness.

When things could shift or change is deeply ingrained in your understanding of how the world operates, it doesn’t much inspire the kind of belief in security that motivates getting attached in relationships.

One thing I found surprising, however, was that the reticence to get attached was equally present among women like Wanda who grew up in a two parent home. Similarly, Jolene who grew up in a blended family, did *not* grow up in an unstable environment. While her mother divorced when she was five, she revealed that she doesn’t remember much about that period. If there was instability, she felt insulated from it. What stands out

in that period for Jolene was her mother's remarriage at nine to her stepfather, who she remains very close to and attributes to making her feel secure enough to be bold and adventurous growing up. "You know, he just made me believe I could do anything. He encouraged me to try and do... whatever". Moreover, living in a middle class neighborhood where she *was* surrounded by couples, seeing couples was her norm. Both she and Greg told of how they see her mom and stepfather's marriage as a model to aspire to. He tells me, "They just seem to enjoy each other, like it's clear how much they love each other. And you feel that. It's probably why their house is always full. It's nice just to be in a space where you know it's, just lots of care and love".

Still, in spite of describing a home life that was the polar opposite of someone like Bianca, her mother's persistent admonitions to "always have your own," remained salient for Jolene. The strength of those deeply embedded messages posed a hindrance to cultivating closeness with men before Greg and made her cautious to get too attached to him as well early on in their relationship.

### **Don't let the pain show**

One final consequence of the cautionary tales women learned about self-protection was that it left some with a reticence around showing and feeling emotion. Anna, for instance, told of being taught by her grandmother that showing sensitivity could be used against her. "Keep it together girl – folks see you like that, they'll take you". Those admonitions, in her estimate, had left her "emotionally hard". She tells me, "It shut me down and made me hostile and made me just hard, and just like you're not gonna hurt me... if it hurt me the way you treat me, I put up a wall. Ain't nobody gonna hurt me". Joy, by contrast, described how she deals with being hurt or disappointment, "I stopped



crying a long, long time ago. But I don't really cry unless I'm really, really sad but I don't cry from anger or frustration anymore. What I try and do is try to keep it moving and figure out a way to get my way". The phrase, "keep it moving" recurred frequently across the interviews of women and men. The underlying message was that it was best to keep busy and occupied in the midst of troubles. If you could at least "keep it moving" there'd be less opportunity to think about or experience pain.

American studies scholar Sherri Parks' (2010) analysis of the trope of the "Strong Black Woman" writes about the cultural premium placed on not stopping long enough to feel. The implicit message is should you take the chance of feeling *anything*, you might be pulled under by the waves of emotions. Yet, as this therapist highlights, that method of coping in the short term can have negative implications for couples' ability to connect over the long term:

Usually I take that opportunity to start talking about some childhood issues, and giving some insight on, "Why do I do the things that I do?... Where does that come from?"... How did you respond to that? What did you do to protect yourself from your alcoholic father, how did you do that? Well I just stay busy. Oh okay you stay busy, now your husband complains you work too much... Where does that come from? And it may not be because my husband is abusive, but just I stay busy and keep moving, and now that's not something I have to flee, changing that behavior is very difficult.

While there's been considerable examination of how norms of masculinity teach boys to suppress emotions, it seems some girls – black girls at least - are not immune from those same warnings and reprimands to mute emotion. In "Reserve," a poignant essay about being taught to mask feelings, journalist Helena Andrews (2012) describes her initiation into a habit of emotional suppression and wearing the mask of stoic reserve:

When I was thirteen I came home to nobody. My mother was gone. There wasn't a note. This wasn't unusual. After sitting on the couch totally unfazed for more than an hour, watching afternoon reruns, I was surprised by a knock. "Your

mother's in jail," my grandmother said from the other side of the screen door, her face shaded by the dark netting. Mesh or no mesh, I wouldn't have been able to read her. Her face was always inscrutable. "You're gonn have to stay over at my house for a while," she said, opening the door without invitation and walking into the living room. Waiting.

I didn't miss my cue. I got up, headed silently to my room, packed my school uniform and underwear, and stomped my way to Grandmommy's smoke-filled '92 Nissan. We rode the entire way in silence... The point: my face never changed. I was immutable. To get by without her, I had to be. My mask saved, cloaking whatever was going on underneath with an autopilot *I'm okay* that spoke volumes. It brought me from my grandmother's shotgun house on 108<sup>th</sup> and Vermont all the way downtown to my spotless private school ... that was the first time I put on my mask and it felt good. I was cool. I had to be – to keep from falling apart.

Andrews' "mask" is one she describes as one most of her black girlfriends echo they grew up learning to don as well.

#### *Between survival and security: Doing resilience*

The challenges these women describe paint a very different portrait than what's typically depicted in studies of carework. Despite the prevailing narrative that women not only want emotional intimacy more, but are also "naturally" better and more skilled at achieving it – these accounts speak to how women also struggle with establishing intimacy. Most identified the cautionary tales they'd learned growing up as the source of their reticence to get emotionally engaged. If we think of socialization as purposive, tailored to manage common experiences, conditions and situations with given resources (Jasper 2006), then the cautionary tales these women heard suggest their parents anticipated their daughters would encounter an uncertain and insecure world.

The lessons about how to manage their feelings and attachments in the midst of insecurity resonated with two streams of previous research on cultural adaptations to insecure conditions. First, there is a body of research that emerged in response to the

culture of poverty debates (Moynihan 1965) that focuses specifically on the experience of poor black women and the adaptations they made to be “resilient” and “resourceful” in the midst of poverty. It suggests that black daughters are socialized to be strong, resourceful, and self-reliant (Ladner 1971; Stack 1975). Extending this lens, later research theorized about how these conditions may have informed intimate relationships. Patricia Hill Collins (1987) reveals that black mothers can send conflicting messages to their daughters: on one hand, that securing a black man to marry is the ultimate sign of achievement as black women and on the other, that black women must be exceedingly self-reliant because they will likely never find a “good” black mate (Carother 1990; King 1999). Similarly, Franklin (1984) suggests that such lessons can result in self-protective stances that undermine the expressive traits traditionally associated with the cult of femininity, even while hope of a finding a mate urges them to cultivate expressiveness, warmth and nurturance.<sup>34</sup> Yet other scholars suggest these girls learn to be independent, but not at the neglect of nurturance. South (1993), for instance, describes how black girls seem to be socialized to be “at once independent and assertive as well as familistic and nurturant...to be as authoritative, individualistic and confident as African American sons are, and as economically self-sufficient and personally autonomous as sons are” (73).

While most of the research examining “survival strategies” was derived from the experience of young, urban poor women, other research suggests that these lessons are more widespread – often showing up in the trope of the “Strong Black Woman”.

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<sup>34</sup> Much of the qualitative research suggests that some black women also grow up hearing repeated derogatory insinuations about black men (e.g. “Black men ain’t shit,” or “Black men are bad providers”), leaving them with negative caricatures that undermine their ability to trust or emotionally invest in black men (Hatchett 1991; Hill Collins 1999; Rose 2003).

Underlining the pitfalls that accompany the “imperative of the strong black woman,”

Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) asserts:

[T]he icon of strength encourages resiliency and independence, it also discourages black women from admitting weakness, sadness, and the need for help... But even as they give help, black women may feel discouraged from revealing the depths of their own needs. The strong black woman is denied her sadness. Because she must serve, she cannot be broken, but black women do experience sadness and are perhaps uniquely vulnerable to it. African Americans report the lowest levels of happiness, and one obvious reason lies in the depressing statistics regarding black women’s poverty levels, unemployment status, and single parenthood. But perhaps the unattainable goal of perfect independence also contributes (Kindle location 3392-3397).<sup>35</sup>

Paradoxically, the potential for black women’s needs being met is equally undermined by emotion strategies that adjure them to never admit or acknowledge needs. Thus, this relational coach describes:

What our emotional trauma has done is limit our what I call emotional toolbox. So black women get to be broken, crazy, strong hypersexualized, and a mummy. And that’s it. You don’t get to cry, you don’t get to be vulnerable, you don’t get to be protected. You don’t get to be defended. That’s what happens when you have a limited emotional toolbox.<sup>36</sup>

Hill Collins (2000) elaborates, “tensions characterizing Black women’s necessary self-reliance joined with our bona-fide need for protection, as well as those characterizing Black men’s desire to protect Black women juxtaposed to the admirations and resentment of Black women’s assertiveness and independence, result in a complicated love and trouble tradition” (157).

A second body of more recent research is examining how increasing job uncertainty and family instability is impacting Americans at large, leaving many Americans feeling

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<sup>35</sup> Womanist theologian Monica Coleman (2008) suggests that for black women the expectation to be strong under any condition, leaning only on God and faith, can lead them to mask needs, depression, and feelings of weakness fearing if they reveal these emotions they will be blamed for having weak faith or a failing as a black woman (See also Gilkes 2001).

<sup>36</sup> These caricatures of black women as “broken, crazy, strong, hyper-sexualized and a mummy” the coach details speak to what Hill Collins (2000) conceptualizes as “controlling images” for black women.

like they're living in an "insecurity culture". Two exemplary studies underline how people are making cultural accommodations of emotion management to cope with these conditions - which shape how they engage in their relationships – and socialize their children to prepare for their own. Marianne Cooper (2011; 2014) examines how families in Silicon Valley are developing new ways of "doing security," using emotion work to shift their perspectives on what security requires. In this instance, Cooper's concept of "downscaling" as a form of emotion work that helps people suppress or lower expectations to cope with the anxieties of living in a period of increasing economic insecurity and few social safety nets. When people do this sort of "downscaling" emotion work, they try "to transform feelings of insecurity into feelings of security, an emotional adaptation that makes life and its problems more bearable and manageable" (Cooper 2014: Kindle Locations 1626-1631). In a similar manner, Allison Pugh (2011; 2015) examines how parents have shifted their socialization tactics in this environment, equipping their children to be "flexible" so that they'll have "the capacity to withstand and even look forward to change, cultivating new relationships and handling new situations" (4). At times, flexibility is framed as an "opportunity, the almost gleeful capacity to take advantage of prospects at work and in private life" and for others, as armour as an "embittered, necessary and pre-emptive response to expected betrayal" (9).

On a slightly different front, Kathleen Gerson's (2010) study of work/family attitudes among young Americans (18-32), suggests most aspire to egalitarian relationships. Yet, skeptical of the structural realities of inflexible workplace policies and little support for families, they also held "fallback" strategies should their ideal scenarios fail to pan out. Most men preferred new-traditional models of family life. Women preferred a more self-

reliant life – often hoping to avoid their mother’s struggles, they were getting themselves prepared to go it alone.

The cautionary tales recounted by women in my sample are in some ways consistent and dissonant with both literatures. Like the research on black women’s “survival strategies,” women whose account placed the greatest accent on self-reliance had grown up with single or divorced (but remarried) mothers (5/21). Yet, those same messages were also echoed among women who’d grown up in dual-parent homes, raised by both mother and father (8/21). In contrast to previous research on black women, however, there was very little in the way of negative caricatures of black men in the accounts of women in the study.<sup>37</sup> To the contrary, several women emphasized that even when their mothers were adamant about the need to be self-reliant, their mothers had been just as vigilant about *not* accompanying that message with negativity and a sense of pessimism about black men. Jolene, for instance, insists that her mother’s messages were, “never, never downing men or anything, it was very much a women’s empowerment thing”.

While there was an undeniable insistence on being self-reliant, women in the sample didn’t trace it to stereotypes of what black men were or weren’t. The messages the women in my study learned were a mix of female empowerment and pragmatism. In this sense, women’s accounts resonated more with recent research on “flexibility” and “downscaling”. What is significantly different, however, is that women in my study were explicitly *taught* to be self-reliant. The respondents in recent research, by contrast, are

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<sup>37</sup> The absence of male denigration may also be a feature of the fact that such studies have largely been conducted in low-income Black communities. The prevalence of such sentiments among those women may be a reflection of the economic instability of the men to which they had access, who are often viewed as irresponsible and unreliable (Ladner 1971; Stack 1975; Wilson 1996; Pinderhughes 2002).

described as being in the *process* of constructing emotion strategies to manage feelings of insecurity as a result of encountering hardships. As the therapist above underlines, the likelihood of experiencing insecurity was the point of departure for the women in my study, where it is a recent revelation and point of arrival for those in this new research.

The lessons of the women in my study struck me as lying somewhere between “survival strategies” and “doing security” or “flexibility as armour” strategies outlined in previous research. I read them instead as strategies of resilience, which as Danielle describes, “is about how quick can we get back on track so that we can continue to do what we need to do? And it’s like, the faster you can get back on track, to me, is what I think resilience is...you gotta be able to get back on track”. The notion of resilience resonates more with the degree of empowerment and agency my respondents expressed, than notions of survival. Conversely, the notions of “doing security” which assume some basic level of security, strike me as different from the anticipation of challenges that my participants described.

#### *How new is the “new” insecurity culture?*

Can we speak of new emotional investment strategies? Do people think of emotion as that which they invest or divest so that the self is ever more lightly connected to feeling? ... I am not arguing that people enter relationships more lightly nowadays than they did thirty years ago, or that they think shallow connections are better than deep ones. I am suggesting that one important strategy of emotion management *is to develop the ability to limit emotional connection since this strategy adapts us to survival in a destabilizing culture of capitalism.* (Hochschild 2003: 125).

Like Pugh and Cooper, here Hochschild suggests that strategies that “limit emotional connection” she observed might reflect a “new” emotional culture cultivated for managing insecure or “unsettled periods” (Swidler 1986; 2001). Yet, the messages these

scholars observe being taught to (largely white middle class) teens or currently being cultivated by their middle aged parents, seem to echo those instilled into women in my study, now in their late 30s to mid-50s. This raises the question, how new is this new insecurity culture? Said differently, when evaluating the newness of the “insecurity culture,” perhaps we should be asking - new for whom?

While the black experience in America is multifaceted, heterogeneous and dynamic, a diverse body of scholarship from sociology and social psychology, to economics and public health attests to black peoples’ greater likelihood of experiencing a host of potentially destabilizing issues, including: racism and discrimination (Feagin 1991; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Fleming, Lamont and Welburn 2012), financial strain (Bryant et al., 2008; Taylor, Tucker, and Mitchell-Kernan, 1999), incarceration (Alexander 2010), residential segregation (Massey and Denton 1994; Oliver and Shapiro 2008), as well as multiple family stressors (Mills and Combs 2002) and extended family caregiving roles (O’Brien 2012; McAdoo 1997; Taylor et al., 1997). While the impact of each of these conditions varies, the conditions are *not* new and all can contribute to a sense of insecurity and uncertainty.

One therapist, whose clientele includes white and black couples alike, recounts how he felt there were fundamental differences in the challenges faced by each group – even though his price point meant he works with middle class couples in both cases. What he underlines is that his black clients seem to grapple with more uncertainty in their “core life issues” of home, family, and neighborhood than his white clients.

*[Int]: So, for comparisons sake, what are the kinds of issues that you find white couples dealing with when it came to relationships versus black couples? You mentioned that they aren't dealing with those core life issues, what issues were they dealing with in comparison?*



In the black community, dealing with the African Americans, is different from when I've had white clients... The issues, core life issues, weren't the real challenge. And a lot of it has to do with, opportunities that they have had and not really having had to deal with poverty and the effects of poverty... He might want to, the child to grow up in the same community he grew up in, or have the experience he's had, but then that'll be putting the child at risk to be violent... The average white couple that I'm dealing with don't have that issue, 'cause the violence is not an issue in their community... When you look around you don't see, you know... things are dilapidated, poor services, no parks, no libraries or those things, so that impacts relationships and family.

The therapist's evaluation of his clients resonates with distinctiveness in the black experience underlined by some scholars. Furstenberg (2007) notes:

Much of what counts as culture is a provisional and often contradictory set of beliefs ... a historical adaptation to enduring circumstances that has and will again adapt to changing conditions. Blacks in American society, as elsewhere, have generally faced harsher conditions... the issue of cultural origins, slavery and its aftermath, and economic and social discrimination created a special set of conditions for blacks, especially those facing persistent poverty, and these conditions are, at most, incompletely replicated by other ethnic groups (432).

An expansive body of scholarship has examined cultural adjustments around family structure and kin networks cultivated to navigate these conditions. If, as Cooper tells us, "Coping with insecurity and uncertainty is an extraordinarily emotional process" then it seems likely that these conditions may shape their emotional experience as well (2014: kindle location 641).

Personal relationship scholar Stanley Gaines (1995) has argued that the "socioemotional processes of couples from various backgrounds [may] look very different from each other," and as a result, "the causes of ostensibly identical behaviors (e.g. consulting each other regarding major purchases, listening to each other's problems, reassuring each other that net income is not a valid indicator of personal competence) might differ according to the cultural perspectives of the partners in particular personal relationships" (85). These differences may reflect what Peterson (2006) characterizes as

our “emotional socialization” which he defines as “the process whereby individuals come to learn their emotion culture. Given the importance of understanding emotion culture to engaging in daily interactions, emotional socialization is crucial to our development into emotionally competent actors” (122). Thoits (2004) suggests that every society contains multiple version of emotional socialization marked by different kinds of feelings, framing rules and preferences in strategies of emotion management (Thoits 1990). Similarly, Orbuch and Brown (2006) suggest that different racial groups may be socialized in different social, cultural, and historical contexts that influence how they view love, marriage and family life.<sup>38</sup> What these scholars underline is that while the emotional behaviors and challenges we observe in relationships may appear similar, we can’t assume they necessarily emerge from similar origins, much less that they are perceived and feel the same.

In “What I’ve left Unsaid,” a poignant essay NPR host Michele Martin (2014) penned about why the cancellation of her show, “Tell me more,” was so significant to people of color, she describes a disconnect between the work-family life issues in popular discourse and the experience of many people of color:

[T]his is, I believe one reason the well-worn grooves of the debate about work and family life seem so irrelevant to so many people of color. Front and center in their minds is making partner at the law firm, but also making sure that a family member's car doesn't get repossessed. Front and center in their minds isn't just getting a bigger house, but also keeping their parents' home out of foreclosure. Front and center in their minds is not just getting what they want, but also being sure that others in their circle have what they need. What's different, in short, for so many minority women, is that they cannot help but see themselves as a part of something larger—perhaps because they know there are obstacles in their lives and the lives of their family members that no amount of "grit" will overcome.

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<sup>38</sup> Fields et al. (2006) suggest that membership in socially marginalized groups may shape the emotion ideologies and strategies individuals in them bring into relationships.

This disconnect is equally apparent in the scholarship on the work-family divide and claims of a new culture of insecurity. For the women in my study, the lessons they received about resilience weren't reflective of *new* conditions, but longstanding patterns of uncertainty. They echo the same issue Martin speaks to: context matters—in terms of point of departure and present realities.

A persistent critique of much of the research on women's experiences produced by white feminists across disciplines is that it normalizes the white middle class experience in ways that obscure variation among women (West and Fenstermaker 1995; DeVault 1999). Many of those critiques have emphasized how it collapses difference and nuance between women, often marginalizing the experience of poor women and women of color in the aim of making larger claims about gender in American population (Hill Collins 1990). I echo these critiques. Moreover, beyond failing to create a nuanced portrait of American women's experience, there are also interpretative implications to failing to contextualize our analysis (Crenshaw 1993). How so? Let me suggest a few questions that emerge when we think about the broader sociohistorical context and particularities of black American experience.

First, let's return to Anita's case highlighted in the introduction. In *The Second Shift* (1989) Hochschild's central premise was that friction in couples' relationships is driven by the "new" influx of women into the workforce. Yet as she underlines in a footnote, "This is more true of white and middle-class women than it is of black or poor women, whose mothers often worked outside the home. But the trend I am talking about— an increase from 20 percent of American women in paid jobs in 1900 to 55 percent in 1986— has affected a large number of women" (20). *If* these changes are not new for

black (or poor) women, then we might ask, is interpreting their experience through a focus on the “shifting” meaning of home and work really the best analytical lens? Is their tension just or mainly a function of their tug of war about her employment? Or, might part of the challenge in the couple’s relationship be steeped in the challenges Anita underlines in cultivating emotional attachment? On another front, how do we understand Ray’s misgivings about Anita working mainly as a reflection of his desires to control her as Hochschild intimates? Or might there be another element that is more about his pride in his *ability* to provide, given the history of the precariousness of black men’s employment?<sup>39</sup>

On another front, we could consider Gerson’s (2010) finding that while most women had a fallback strategy of self-reliance (70%), when she took account of both gender and race –100% of her black female respondents held self-reliance as their fallback strategy – one hundred percent. Gerson does point out this statistic, making note of some particularity, yet the accent is placed on the fact that black women reflect the same overall trend of the *majority* of women in her sample in preferring self-reliance. Little is made of the unwavering uniformity of black women’s responses. Given the nature of her analysis, an in-depth analysis of that difference may have understandably been beyond the scope of her study. Yet, the problem I see isn’t developing a full analysis of the issue – it’s the implicit conclusion that it simply reflects the broader pattern. There’s no questioning or reflection on the significance of the total lack of variation among her black female respondents. Previous research tells us that black women are often raised to be strong, resourceful, and self-reliant (Hill Collins 1999), and definitions of womanhood

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<sup>39</sup> We know, for example, that the economic precariousness of black men can fuel fears about their ability to support families, resulting in “provider role anxieties” (Hatchett et al. 1995), which are of “major psychological significance” to men of color (McLloyd et al. 2002).

for black people also include achievement, work, and independence (Giddings 1984). Thus we might ask: does the uniformity in response reflect some cultural differences in the meaning of self-reliance in black women's upbringing? How might familiarity with this trope and examples of self-reliant women shape the extent to which they find that strategy feasible as compared to other women?

Finally, we might also consider the significance of the overlaps in the lessons of resilience learned decades ago by women in my sample and the strategies around “downscaling” security (Cooper 2014) or Pugh’s conceptualization of “flexibility-as-armour”. A central premise for both authors is that rising social and economic insecurity shapes both how people manage their own relationships, as well as how they are socializing their children. The emotion strategies they use to navigate rising uncertainty represent cultural adaptations to change. The women in my study echo some of the same discourse around being cautious with attachments being wary of dependence – yet they aren’t engaged in the work of *producing* strategies for resilience. Having grown up with these lessons, they were already part of their cultural toolkit (Swidler 1986). The cautionary tales and feeling rules they’d learned had helped them erect emotional armor. In order to connect with their partners, however, they described needing to learn how to take that armor off.<sup>40</sup> In some ways then, we can see the women in my sample as engaging in the opposite process – learning how to counterbalance and mediate the kind of lessons that were being developed and taught in the insecurity studies.

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<sup>40</sup> My findings are consistent with Bethea and Allen’s (2013) observation in their review of research on black couples that, “socialization to be strong and independent can make African American women reluctant to demonstrate vulnerability and reliance on a partner... At the same time, men’s [violation] in all quarters of American life places them in the same position” (30).

Often women were able to articulate how they thought those lessons had posed a challenge, yet the process of how they'd been able to mediate and disrupt them was a bit more opaque. I discuss a few ways they had been able to conceptualize that process below.

*Being resilient and connected: Emotion work of a different sort*

One strategy women used to allow themselves to get attached was emphasizing the potential rewards over the risks of carework like transparency and accepting support. Telling me how it had taken until their third or fourth year together before she really allowed herself to get attached, "He got in a lot deeper and faster than I did," Jolene described finally taking the risk to invest in the relationship:

When my sister got married I told her, cause she was, I think you have a lot of people who come from divorced families... people think, "Oh my gosh is it gonna work?" ...somehow something switched in me and I decided I would rather take the risk and enjoy the ride, not knowing how long the ride is, much like life, than to never take the ride at all... You commit yourself to that ride and if you commit yourself, it changes the whole interaction.

By accentuating the potential and possibility of commitment, she was able to mediate her fear of the risk. Jolene's shift in perspective doesn't deny the uncertainty and risk in allowing herself to depend on Greg, as she repeats, "Commit yourself to just saying I'm in this, I don't know what the end result will be, I don't know the outcome" and "I don't know the outcome; it's impossible to know what will happen". Other women echoed Jolene's language about overcoming fears of attachment by focusing on "enjoying the ride" noting how they'd decided, "It was just worth it" and "I figured, what did I have to lose?"

On another front, women also cultivated cautionary tales for *themselves* to help them keep their sights trained on why they had to push themselves to be more open in their relationships in spite of their fears or anxieties. When I asked what she wanted her daughters to know about relationships, Rosie tells me she wants them to know they can, “Actually ask a man for help. Wow that took me like eight years, about eight years to get to that point”. Reminding herself how long it took for her to allow herself to depend on Rob – keeps her conscious of the distance it caused between them.

I didn’t really know how to depend on anyone, you know, not just him. But it took time – I just told myself – he’s still here and he don’t deserve that. I think I just told myself when I got scared – like when we first moved in together – you can have something different. You can have something different, you know, than what you grew up seeing. And you know, I loved him, I didn’t want to push him away.

In this case, she wanted to offer her daughters a different story than the one she received, one that included both independence and mutual reliance. The desire to instill in her daughters that it’s acceptable and feasible to depend on a man was a testament of faith. She hazards hope they’ll have what she once could not imagine as possible.

Danielle describes another way women did emotion work, telling me how the implicit messages she’d received about masking her emotion had left her feeling emotionally ill-equipped when she first got married.

Like, I don’t think I ever saw my mother cry. She dealt with a lot, but she kept moving, “Girl – ain’t no time to be crying over spilt milk,” she’d say. So we didn’t much show feelings – not affectionate and no crying, *no* crying. I just didn’t do that. I remember feeling damaged and I always say I had to become emotionally literate because I was emotionally illiterate I was so shut down.

Danielle attributes her shift to being more emotionally expressive to two things – having a stillborn child and counseling. After she and Carl lost their son, her difficulty communicating what she felt began to undermine their relationship. Unable to articulate

her feelings or to allow herself to lean on Carl, she threw herself into church activities to avoid him and her feelings of guilt and blame. He was the one that demanded they go to counseling, where she said she discovered, “I had all these pent up emotions - years and years of feelings”. For Danielle the challenge was disrupting the way of coping with emotions that’s most comfortable, “It’s still not easy, my pattern is to shut down and turn inward, stuff it down, you know? But I have to just talk myself into it, kinda psyche myself up. I say, ‘Look Dani, it’s okay, it hurts. Feel it and then get it out, you’re gonna feel better once it’s out, you’ll feel better’”. The emotion work she describes illustrates with what Hochschild (1989, 2003) characterizes as evocation of emotion – where Danielle literally talks herself into feeling and acting differently. Kristian, by contrast, emphasizes how she’d learned how to be more comfortable showing what she felt from Darren’s family.

The thing is, kind of opposite of what people typically think, but he was much better at all the feeling stuff than I was. Between growing up in a house full of sisters and all the work he did with the students, he knew how to say what he felt. You know it was like, here’s a man that’s not afraid to cry. And that’s just how their whole family is... [laughs] I use to think they were real volatile – but they just don’t hide what they feel.

For Kristian, Darren and his family gave her another frame to think through showing her feelings. In contrast to her family, where she describes her mother as seldom being explicit, instead using coercion and manipulation to get her dad to respond, “It was refreshing, to think I could just be up front with what I feel ...I don’t always do that, but I try”.



## *Conclusion*

In much the same way that Cooper (2014) and Pugh (2015) found people “downscaling security” and emphasizing “flexibility” as strategies for managing times that feel insecure, some black women were taught resilience strategies to deal with uncertainty and insecurity in their lives. The cautionary tales and feeling rules some women brought into their relationships provided them with some highly effective emotional strategies for remaining resilient in the face of uncertainty. Pugh found there were some benefits to the “flexibility-as-armour paradigm,” which she says, “signified a certain buoyancy, as if even getting hit by unasked-for-change, someone would bounce back ready for anything” (2011: 22). Like Pugh, I found that in their most affirming sense, many of the lessons women learned about how to maintain resilience helped them to stay malleable to shifting situations. There is wisdom in keeping attachments loose, for instance, when it lessens the difficulty of being hurt and letting go when losses occur, helping people to recover faster. On the other hand, when practicing resilience stood at odds with the carework of getting emotionally attached, communicating needs, and revealing feelings, it could also pose a challenge for cultivating the emotional dimensions of their relationships. Due to those challenges, these women engaged in different kinds of emotion work in their relationships than what’s typically presented in extant studies.

These women’s accounts also illustrate why scholars like Cancian (1987) and Jamieson (1998; 1999) have argued that we must conceptualize intimacy beyond its expressive terms. Had I focused only on expressive forms of carework, I may well have missed challenges around relying on their partners or developing emotional attachments that were critical for these women. By broadening our examinations of emotional

intimacy beyond self-disclosure and its expressive facets, we are able to witness and identify other areas of tension in couples' attempts to cultivate closeness.

In highlighting the challenges women face with cultivating intimacy, my findings also disturb the gender essentialism present in much of the extant research, which often takes for granted women's ease in disclosure and carework. More specifically, in this chapter I try to underline that how we cultivate closeness and engage in carework is not natural, but socially informed – and the lessons women learn about emotional engagement can also undermine connection. Unfortunately, the challenges they face in developing closeness can get lost in work that focuses primarily on gender comparisons. Just as significantly, even if women feel more at ease with emotional connection than the men in their lives, it doesn't mean it's natural or easy for them.

Finally, having brought my analysis into conversation with recent research on growing insecurity in America, I complicate the assertions about the emergence of a “new” insecurity culture. Recent studies suggest that the sense of living in an insecurity culture is leading people to cultivate emotion strategies to be more flexible and feel more secure. What the claims of a new insecurity culture obscure, however, is that while a sense of insecurity may be mounting among middle America – for other groups particularly those that are racial minorities, poor or marginalized, the conditions being described as new may be more of the same. What's been deemed new seems to be more a case of the expansion of anxieties and concerns that some groups, until recently, have been insulated from.

It is common knowledge in sociology that social shifts and structural conditions impact groups and communities in varied ways and that those impacts can strike them in

different eras. As a result, developing a comprehensive understanding of how a given social condition is perceived, experienced and responded to among different groups, we must take into account differences in groups' historical points of departure. Some of the women in my study, for example, spoke of resilience strategies as practices they needed to mediate or deconstruct in order to form closeness in their intimate relationships, instead of as habits they needed to cultivate and employ in order to navigate feelings of insecurity. As a result, we might think of the kind of emotion work my respondents described as the inverse of that underlined in extant research on insecurity ... or perhaps, their emotion work simply represents being at a further point along a long unfolding process.

## **Chapter 7 – Conclusion: Connecting the ties that bind**

*What work must partners do, jointly and individually, to stay connected?  
What sociocultural norms and life lessons inform the emotional work they believe  
they should do and how? Do the kind of strategies they employ shape  
their sense of connectedness and if so, how?*

This study was anchored by a desire to understand the kinds of emotion work men and women do in order to cultivate and sustain emotional connection with their significant others. In taking up this issue, I was guided by two distinct but intertwined conceptual and empirical aims. On one hand, I hoped to re-invigorate empirical research on the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of couples' lives. These areas have been understudied in sociology in recent years as we've abdicated that inquiry in that terrain to other disciplines like psychology, social work and communication studies. In that effort, I have hoped to bring much needed attention to research around carework which Duncombe and Marsden (1993) once deemed "the neglected aspect of family work". Methodologically, I also hoped reintegrate research on family work with its earlier foundations in the sociology of emotions. In doing so, I hoped to shift the discussion away from the recent trend of conducting quantitative evaluations of spouses' division of labor, building on Hochschild's initial insight that what matters for spouses' sense of marital quality and satisfaction isn't their relative contribution to family work, but rather their feelings about marital arrangements and the effectiveness of their strategies for managing these feelings. Accessing these subjective understandings of women and men's intimate lives necessitates a more qualitative approach.

On the other hand, the conceptual aim of inductive grounded theory research is often to develop a cohesive, broad theory about social phenomenon. Yet, as Kathy Charmaz'

reflects on her own research in her widely cited *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2006), “despite having no difficulty defining loss of self a more basic than managing illness or disclosing illness – I could not define a single basic process that unified everything I was learning. For several years I wrestled with trying to identify one basic social process that captured everything I learned about experiencing illness” (139). As Charmaz insightfully reminds us, our research doesn’t always lend itself to the ends of defining a single process. Surveying previous research on couples as I worked on elaborating and refining my analysis, I found that many of my inductively derived concepts spoke to issues of emotion work. Thus, rather than proposing a new theory when a multifaceted and elegant one already existed, I focus the dissertation instead on extending and refining the emotion management framework (Hochschild 1983; 1989), which I contend has been narrowly applied and as a result underutilized. In doing so, I stake out the terrain of how people go about the “doing” of emotions, as inherently social. How we conduct and manage emotion in our relationships isn’t just a reflection of our unique individual personalities and proclivities; we’re taught which actions and feelings are appropriate in the practice of care. Ultimately, to realize both aims I tried to ask new questions about the emotional dimensions of couples’ lives, applying concepts of emotion work in novel ways.

Broadly speaking, I examine emotions along three dimensions: interpersonal, individual and sociocultural. Interpersonally, in Chapter Four I work to shed light on how couples co-construct emotion strategies in the process of adjusting to each other and developing way to manage conflict with each other’s idiosyncrasies, personalities and habit. In that effort, I underline how their stories of “how we do it” help to reveal their sense of couple identity - who *they* are as a couple. On the individual level, I tap into

Hochschild's traditional definition of emotion work as individuals work to manage their own emotions. More precisely, I examined how partners managed the feelings of disappointment, frustration, guilt, inadequacy and loneliness that arise when emotional closeness breaks down. In this case, I explored how men and women did emotion work to navigate adverse feelings about their partner or the relationship, as well as their own intrapersonal conflicts about appropriate feelings, roles and action. Finally, on the sociocultural dimension, I probed how the emotion norms and feeling rules passed down via socialization shape how people engage in our relationships. This shows up in chapter three, for instance, where I discuss how gender is and is not salient in informing partners desires for, perceptions of and approaches to intimacy.

The dissertation is titled "Essays on emotion work" quite purposively. With so many unanswered questions in this area, conceptually and empirically, each chapter presents a self-contained meditation on fairly distinct facets of the emotion work women and men undertake in navigating their intimate relationships. More specifically, the empirical chapters focused on four topics issues: how gender operates in partners desires for, perceptions of and approaches to intimacy; how emotion work can be used to move towards consensus men and women cultivated shared emotion strategies to guide emotion work that goes into cultivating a shared sense of couple identity; understanding other challenges partners face in cultivating intimacy and the emotion work women and men do to manage them; and understanding the challenges women face in cultivating intimacy beyond dissatisfaction with their partner's emotional engagement.

In the rest of the discussion, rather than summarizing each chapter, I focus on a few prominent themes that weave their way across chapters, underlining the thematic,

conceptual and analytical contributions the study makes to our knowledge on emotion work, couple relationships and sociology at large.

### *Beyond Gender (Essentialism)*

Perhaps the most recurrent theme that weaves throughout the study is that gender matters in understanding couple relationships - but we need much more nuanced, dynamic and multifaceted conceptualizations of *how* it matters. Broadly speaking, I contend that we need to be as conscientious about overlap between genders and variations within gender as we are about differences across gender groups in our analyses of how gender shapes intimate relationships. By probing overlap, variation and differences, we avoid the pitfalls of lapsing into gender essentialism and cultivate a fuller picture of the saliency of gender in varied facets of interpersonal relationships. In chapter three for instance, I challenge the divergent portrait of men and women's desire for emotion intimacy as well as their capacity and skill to be emotionally supportive presented in extant research. I found that both women *and* men valued characteristics like emotional intimacy and mutual disclosure and were both invested in maintaining closeness in their partnerships. There were also some differences in how they experienced the process of cultivating closeness- men being more likely to lament loneliness, while women focused more on their partner's disclosure. Most significantly, neither men nor women explained differences in how they and their partner emotionally engaged in particularly gendered ways. Instead, they interpreted divergences in terms of personality and family background.

In a similar manner, in Chapter Six, I trouble the monolithic portrait of women as intimacy experts, challenging notions that caring and openness come naturally for women

as described in work like Carol Gilligan's *A Different Voice* (1982). Observing how some women in my sample seemed to engage in a very different brand of emotion work in support of their relationships, I underline how a tradition of socialization that placed a premium on being self-sufficient and resilient created other challenges with emotional intimacy in their relationships. Instead of doing emotion work to manage dissatisfaction with their partner's emotionality, as emphasized in previous research (e.g. suppressing desires for closeness, managing disappointment with emotional intimacy, etc.), I found some women struggled with disclosing their feelings, being emotionally expressive and relying on their partners. Thus one central takeaway from the study, echoing much of the recent research that has emerged out of counseling and clinical psychology, is that our intimate relationships are much more complex than claims of bifurcated his and hers marriages would lead us to believe (Barnett and Rivers 2004).

On a related front, I can't help but wonder if one reason that research on emotion work in the private sphere has been so rare compared to inquiry on emotional labor in the job market (Wharton 2009), is because we've examined emotion work almost exclusively as it relates to gendered power differentials. That emphasis is problematic in two ways. First, studies on couples' emotion work around carework often revolve around a taken for granted, and I would argue erroneous, assumption that women are perpetual subordinates in heterosexual relationships. While there is no questioning that gender inequities tend to favor men within most social institutions, there is considerable variation in how those dynamics unfold in individual relationships. It's problematic to assume that the persistence of gender inequities in multiple spheres of life means that those inequities will necessarily be replicated in our personal relationships or all facets of them. Perhaps



more significantly, power dynamics within a given relationship are also fluid and shifting; rarely does one person hold all the cards at all times. As previous research on emotional labor in the marketplace has revealed the power doesn't just move vertical along hierarchies, but also horizontal in peer relationships (Hochschild 2003). The upshot is that extant research examining dynamics in heterosexual tends to re-inscribe and perpetuate a single narrative, whereby women are on the losing ends of intimate relationships. This study illuminated why that narrative needs to be interrogated and complicated. We might ask, for instance, how do these processes unfold in same-sex couples when gender differentiated assumptions about power can't be so easily applied?

Another problematic consequence of focusing on gender inequities and difference is that it can create a tendency to emphasize conflict in relationships to the neglect of care and consensus. That tendency has had three very important implications in shaping how relationship dynamics have been conceptualized in the literature. First, extant research can give a rather pessimistic portrait of coupledness that suggests relationships are mainly battlegrounds, rather than places that also allow individuals to forge solidarity, support and common ground. Indeed, as I delved further into the emotion management literature, whether examining traditional forms of family work (e.g. divisions of labor or childcare) or carework, I couldn't help but ask myself: Well, if things are so bad and contentious, why does anyone ever get married at all? Secondly, failing to be as attentive to care and consensus can also give the impression that marriages which partners evaluate to be happy or satisfying on the whole just happen; that they don't also require considerable emotion work. Lastly, it can convey a bifurcated picture whereby relationships either work or they don't, giving the impression that they're either wholly supportive and happy

or conflictual and challenging. Yet we know that couple relationships, like all relationships, are at varied moments supportive, conflictual, happy and challenging.

Finally, unseating gender as the primary axis of analysis may also help us better elucidate the degree to which the emotion work we observe among couples is unique to managing gender dynamics in intimate relationships or if it's a reflection of more general processes that exist across varied forms of interpersonal interactions. In chapter four, for instance, I move away from relying on examining gender ideologies as a tool for accessing how spouses thought of themselves as a couple (e.g. Hochschild's 1989 schema of traditional, transitional and egalitarian couples). Instead, the analysis revolves around the stories couple told in portraying themselves as problem-solvers and decision makers managing the mundane, but inescapable realities of melding lives. These challenges around avoiding and resolving tensions, striking compromises, and communicating challenges are issues which individuals face in other relationships. How, we might ask, does the emotion work of navigating individual personalities or finding ways to collectively act and make decisions emerge in other relationships? What emotion work is needed to manage these issues among roommates or merging business partners where some consensus is necessary for both parties to co-exist? Or, how do parents develop joint strategies of emotion work as they try to integrate blended families? Conversely, how do the tactics used by those who are willingly merging (newly married parents) differ or overlap with those who had mergers imposed on them (step-siblings)? These lines of questioning highlight just a few of the ways that we can begin to see the broader utility of the emotion management framework, when we think beyond negotiating gender

roles, ideologies and divisions of labor. These are common struggles that arise in negotiating human interaction writ large.

### *RACE-ing the center*

It is fairly apparent that decentering gender in the examination of couple relationships is a central aim and contribution of this study. Yet, while not as intuitively obvious, the dissertation is just as purposive in decentering race. I would argue that perhaps an even more significant, is subtle, contribution of the dissertation to sociological knowledge revolves around how it engages and positions race as a factor in understanding the experiences and perspectives of a sample black participants. More specifically, as I refined my analysis and the central concepts of the dissertation began to narrow in on couples' emotion work, a critical question emerged: Is it possible to examine the experience of black people without race as the dominant idiom? What I hope this dissertation has made apparent is that yes it is – and to assume that race is necessarily salient would be just as erroneous as assuming that gender will be the primary factor in examining couple relationships. Just as I argue in the introduction that while gender matters, it may not always be the primary axis of analysis, so too race matters in couples relationships. Yet, we as researchers must be vigilant not to impose or interject race as the central analytical lens so that we avoid disfiguring and being untrue to our participants' experiences. Thus, I have tried to try teasing out when, how and in what contexts it matters.

One important implication of decentering race is that it allows us to trouble the ideological hegemony around *which* populations are relevant to *what* literatures. Conducting fieldwork over the summer at another university I met with a very thoughtful

and increasingly prominent sociologist. As we sat down to speak, I re-summarized the email I'd sent to introduce myself, offering an abbreviated description of my dissertation research: black couples in enduring relationships, together a decade or more, probing how they explained their ability to stay together, etc. He began posing a number of questions:

That's a really fruitful topic given everything going on with black marriage rates. Are you thinking through the challenges black women in particular face in getting married?

*Well, I don't really deal with marriage and entry to marriage. I focus on couples in intact relationships. They've all been together a decade or more ...*

So where are you drawing your data from? Are you looking at the fragile family literature? It'll be really interesting to look at how all the recent economic changes are impacting selection of partners...

*I'm actually looking at working and middle class black couples so not so much overlap with fragile families work.*

Are you looking at where the breakdown is happening culturally and structurally that's causing so much fragmentation and break up in their relationships

*I don't actually look at that, breakdown and breakup, how they enter or exit. I focus on endurance: how couples sustain relationships and how they account for staying together.*

We went around and around like that, in a bit of sociological "who's on first?" for the first ten minutes of the conversation. Eventually, the parameters of my actual topic research began to sink in and he offered me great food for thought and connected me with other scholars whose work was directly in line with my own. I highlight this story not to question the scholar's intellectual prowess, his intelligence is unquestionable. Rather this experience illustrates the fortitude and staying power of dominant ideological frames for thinking about black gender relationships.

The challenge for those of us that do work on black people is that our work isn't always perceived as being related to studies with thematic or conceptual similarities of non-black participants. Instead, it's almost immediately conceptualized in terms of common themes in sociological research on black people - whether or not there's

substantive overlap. Unfortunately, the parameters of what's considered typical and relevant for this population is rather narrow, largely revolving around social problems (e.g. poverty, marriage rates, racism, inequality, etc.). Thus, despite taking care to emphasize intimacy, enduring relationships and experiences of partnership, when I describe the study to fellow sociologists, they seldom make associations with the sociology of emotions and the family work literature of Hochschild, or cultural conceptions of love and intimacy like Swidler's *Talk of love* (2001) or even Eva Illouz' work that focuses quite explicitly on intimacy. Instead, what sticks in their minds is the couples' blackness, which constrains and narrows the boundaries of what they conceive of as relevant topics on couples or gender. In the case, what comes to mind are debates around problems – issues around marriageable males and women's prospects on the relationship market, animosity in the gender relationships among the urban poor, low marriage rates, as well as high rates of infidelity and divorce. Neither the dominant tradition of attention in sociology nor public imaginary around black relationships easily lend themselves to imagining ties with the literatures I engage – which is why this study, and research like it, is so vital.

One way we as scholars can subvert this ideological hegemony is by engaging these literatures *without* justifying our presence, inserting ourselves into novel spaces and theoretical frameworks, taking for granted that our work belongs in the debate. By examining seemingly “unorthodox” topics or engaging atypical conceptual frames without justifying why these topics are relevant to the populations we examine, the onus is placed on ideological and conceptual gatekeepers to articulate their assumptions about why our research is perceived as out of place in a given domain. In doing so, we have the

opportunity to extend the boundaries of what's considered normal for research in these domains, while challenging the imposition of narrow frames of inquiry on black people.

Secondly, rather than attempting to see how black couples' emotion work compares to that of the almost exclusively white, middle-class couples in previous research, the dissertation engages new terrain, theorizing and extending concepts of emotion work from the experiences of black couples. To that end, the study rarely makes claims about the distinctiveness of emotion work in black couples' relationships. This is even the case in Chapter Six where I examine how some black women's resilience strategies create particularities in the kinds of emotion work they engage in around emotional intimacy. Indeed, because these issues have rarely been explored in studies on couples' emotion work, there is little work which can be explicitly compared. I focused instead on the important roles of *uncertainty* and *insecurity* in shaping emotional engagement – and the greater likelihood that black women would have been taught safeguards for it given their historical experience and contemporary social conditions in the United States. In doing so, I argue that it's not enough to incorporate different groups simply to “diversify” our samples in a given field of research. Rather, we need to engage in the harder task of interrogating how the social positions, conditions and resources of the participants we examine critically impact to the kinds of theories we can and do develop. Said differently, diversifying our samples is not only of *empirical* import allowing us to compare and account for varied experiences – it is of great *theoretical* significance as well.

#### *Analyzing couple relationships*

The final dimension of contributions the study makes are analytical and disciplinary - extending the terrain of research on couples' relationships, raising new questions and

proposing alternate approaches to analysis. One critical issue future studies on emotion work will need to address is cultivating better analytical classification schemas. While Thoits (1990) has offered one heuristic for distinguishing between emotion strategies, there is very little regularity in how emotion strategies are identified in most empirical studies, making it difficult to evaluate and compare them across studies. The idiosyncratic nature by which emotion strategies are currently identified reflects, in part, the inductive nature of extant studies which tend to draw on language derived directly from the data (Schulz 2011; Cooper 2014). While we need not abandon how concepts emerge from the data, there may be ways to be more explicit and methodical in how we identify emotion strategies. For instance, building on heuristics used in my previous research anti-racist strategies (Bickerstaff 2012), in chapter four I categorized emotions strategies by accounting for the direction of the tension partners used emotion work to reconcile: outward directed (e.g. dissatisfaction with partner or intimacy) vs. inward (e.g. conflicting norms informing actions in the marriage), as well as the aim of the strategies (e.g. conciliation, motivation, and justification). There are a number of other ways we could identify the object emotion work like framing strategies are working to alter (e.g. situation, gender roles, feeling, etc.) or the kind of contradiction people are using emotion work to reconcile (e.g. contradictory norms, social roles, taboos or cautionary tales, etc.). We might also categorize emotion work according to the purpose that it serves for individuals. That is, what work does it do *for* them (e.g. allow them to shift behavior, justifying behavior, look past some misgiving towards their partner)?

Perhaps most significantly, the study resists the temptation to rely on typologies of relationships or individuals – a method of analysis that can easily lend itself to obscuring

the dynamism and contradiction that we know are integral to individuals and relationships (Komarovsky 1962; Gerson 2010). One way to avoid this tendency is by shifting our analytical approach, moving away from typologies of people or groups, to focus instead on other units of analysis like types of actions, interactions or processes. One exemplar of this approach is evidenced in Marianne Cooper's recent research (2014) which focuses on various types of emotion work people cultivate to manage one kind of feeling – insecurity and uncertainty. In a slightly different vein, we see another approach to avoiding reified categories in Kathleen Gerson's engaging monograph, *Unfinished gender revolution* (2010). In cultivating her explanation of young men and women's aspirations around family and work, Gerson doesn't focus on the static characterizations of family background typical used in sociology like married, divorced and single parent home. Instead, she focuses on participants' feelings about their *family trajectories* a more dynamic conceptualization that's able to capture the fact that some participants lived in homes where the family structured changed over the course of their formative years.

Taking up the challenge to think beyond traditional typologies in this study, I asked myself, if I don't classify differences in terms of individuals or couples, what other categories might I see? In doing so, I found that the emotion work identified in my data was best captured in categories of stories, situations, and lessons of socialization. In Chapter four, for instance, the analysis is organized around couples' stories about the way they managed "perpetual problems" in their relationships, shedding light on how they saw themselves as a couple – or at least how they wanted to be seen. In Chapter five, by contrast, by focusing on situations when closeness broke down, I helped to reveal not only how both partners experienced dissatisfaction around intimacy, but also the kinds of



emotion work they did when they were dissatisfied with their *own* actions and habits in relationships. Tapping into varied lessons of emotional socialization in Chapter six, I reveal how similar emotion strategies to maintain resilience in times of uncertainty can be engaged in different ways depending on the situational context. My decision not to focus on creating couple typologies was steeped largely in a desire to avoid such over-simplifications. Practically speaking, analyzing types of strategies, situations or lessons also had the effect of multiplying the number of cases I could compare and analyze – a tactic which could be of particular benefit for qualitative researchers working with limited data.

Ultimately, this dissertation tries to offer a more textured, and I hope honest, depiction of the ebb and flow, successes and failures, routines, inconsistency and contradictions that inhere in our intimate relationships.

## Appendix I: Consent Form

### Information & Consent Form

**Purpose of the research:** This study is being conducted for my doctoral dissertation in the Sociology Department at Harvard University. It aims to examine the experience of African American couples today to better understand how they perceive of and understand their intimate relationships.

**What you will do in this research:** If you decide to volunteer, you will be asked to participate in two interviews – one individual and one with your spouse/partner. You will be asked several questions, some about your own relationship, others about your views on relationships and marriage more broadly. With your permission, I will digitally audio record the interviews so that I can pay more concerted attention to your responses without having to take so many notes. Each interview will last approximately 1-2 hours.

**Risks:** Given the nature of the research, many of the questions are about the inner workings of your own intimate relationships. Some of the questions may make you uncomfortable or raise issues that you haven't thought about before. However, participation in the study is completely voluntary and you are not required to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable. While the interviews will cover topics that could be discussed with a professional counselor – please note I am NOT a professional counselor.

**Benefits:** This is a chance for you to tell your story about your experiences concerning about relationships, what makes them work, and lessons you have learned in your own relationship. This is also a chance and to reflect on the strengths or challenges in African American relationships more broadly.

**Confidentiality:** Your responses to the interviews will become part of my dissertation and may be published in articles or presented at conferences, but not in any way that will identify you. The transcripts of your interview responses to interview questions will be kept confidential. Information recorded in your individual interview will also be kept confidential and will **not** be shared with your partner. The interview and transcripts will be assigned a random numerical code. When the interviews are transcribed the names of the interviewees and of other persons mentioned in the interviews will be changed to protect your identity and that of others. The research data (i.e. recordings of interviews as well as demographic questionnaires, field notes, interview transcripts - without your name), will be retained after research is drawn to a conclusion, as new questions may arise in future research that could be answered and addressed by the data collected.

As part of my study, I will keep the key code linking your name with your number. It will be kept in a locked file cabinet in a locked office, and no one else will have access to it. The key code linking your name to the audio recordings, transcripts and field notes will be destroyed when the research is complete. The data will be used for my dissertation and may be used as the basis for articles or presentations in the future, and it may be shared,

with obvious identifiers removed, with other researchers. Although I will not use your name or information that would identify you in any publications or presentations, it is possible that you may recognize yourself or your partner from quotes used in reports and publications.

I will do everything I can to keep others from learning about your participation in this study. To help protect your privacy, I have obtained a Certificate of Confidentiality from the United States Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). With this Certificate, I cannot be forced (for example by court order or subpoena) to disclose information that may identify you in any federal, state, local, civil, criminal, legislative, administrative, or other proceedings. As researcher, I will use the Certificate to resist any demands for information that would identify you, except to prevent serious harm to you or others, and as explained below.

You should understand that a Certificate of Confidentiality does not prevent you, or a member of your family, from voluntarily releasing information about you, or your involvement in this study. The Certificate also does not prevent a disclosure of your information to you, in response to your request. So, for example, if you became involved in a divorce proceeding and the court requires you to ask me for a copy of your own transcript, the Certificate of Confidentiality does not give me the right to refuse the request. The Certificate also does not prevent me from making voluntary disclosures, and I will contact the appropriate authorities if information obtained in the study leads me to believe that you, your spouse/partner, or any child may be in imminent danger, such as a situation involving child abuse or neglect. In providing your oral consent to participate in the study, you will also be consenting to have your information covered under the Certificate.

A Certificate of Confidentiality does not represent an endorsement of the research study by the Department of Health and Human Services or the National Institutes of Health.

**Participation and withdrawal:** Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw by informing me that you no longer wish to participate (no questions will be asked). Again, you may also skip any question during the interview, but continue to participate in the rest of the study.

**To contact the researcher:** If you have questions or concerns about this research, please contact: Jovonne Bickerstaff Phone: (617) 272-5858; 33 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, MA 02138. Email: [jjbicker@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:jjbicker@fas.harvard.edu). You may also contact the faculty member supervising this work: Professor Orlando Patterson, [opatters@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:opatters@fas.harvard.edu).

Whom to contact about your rights in this research, for questions, concerns, suggestions, or complaints that are not being addressed by the researcher, or research-related harm: Harvard University Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Research, 1414 Massachusetts Avenue, Room 234, Cambridge, MA 02138. Phone: 617-496-2847. E-mail: <a href="mailto:cuhs@fas.harvard.edu">cuhs@fas.harvard.edu</a>
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## Appendix II: Interview Schedules

### A. Joint Interview

**Introduction:** *Thank you again for volunteering to participate in this study. Offer brief explanation of the project & structure of the interview. Ask for oral confirmation that they have received, read and understood the project information sheet and ask the verbally confirm that I have permission to digitally audio record the interview.*

**Joint interview:** I'm going to begin by asking you a few questions about your relationship story –how you came to be together & married, how you make decisions, manage the household & handle conflict, &about your perspective on relationships & marriage more broadly. The questions will ask you to think back over your relationship – happy & joyful moments, but also challenging & pressing times. Everything you share in this interview is completely confidential.

Ultimately, the whole objective is to get at the REAL ins-&-outs of keeping a relationship, a marriage together. Good bad, not pretty parts, the work it requires, how it shapes & changes you. Just wanna know what it's like for real, day-to-day for all y'all brave enough to do it.

### Part I: Early years

#### Meetings & early impressions

1. First I'd like to talk about how your relationship developed. How long have 2 of you been together now? Why don't we start from the beginning ... tell me how you 2 first met - do you remember it? Tell me about it... (*same starting point? Get both to tell story, who takes the lead, do they revise other's versions*) what about (*partner*) made him/her stand out, 1<sup>st</sup> impressions/date)
2. How long did the two of you date/see each other? *What did you do together? What made you want to be around? Shared interests, values, meeting family? When did you become exclusive? Early highlights? Some of uncertain, tensions?*
3. Tell me about path to getting married/live together. Why'd you want to marry/live together & how'd you decide? (*circumstances (moving in), proposal, any barriers or obstacles to being together - family, kids, finances, jobs, distance?*) What did you expect marriage/cohabit would be like? What'd you think you'd gain?
4. Of all the people in world – why spend life w/this one? When did you know? Would you say you two were friends when you married/moved in together?

#### First year of marriage

1. Think back to that early period, first married/living together - were there any changes in your relationship as you moved to fiancés or husband & wife? Was there a difference for you? (*ways you had to adjust, things you had to learn about self/other?*) How'd you come to understand you needed to make that shift?

2. Did your thoughts/beliefs change about what marriage was once you'd been married for a while? If so, how?
3. What were the most challenging parts of being married during that time (*greatest tension; issues you argued about, things you had to figure out self/spouse*)? Most satisfying?

## **Part II: Relationship maintenance**

### **Daily realities of relationship (routines, activities)**

1. I want to shift gears & get a sense of what your life looks like now –what's a typical week? [Past week, was it a typical? If not, when? Can you walk me thru it beginning Sunday? (*how they start the day, working vs home, together, alone, activities, conflict*)
2. Managing the house, you mentioned \_\_\_\_ How'd you figure out who does what? (*divided by task or free time, how decided*)? What happens if something isn't done?
3. Are there things you try to make sure you do with or for each other regularly? Things you try to avoid, do your best to never do?
4. A big part of any ongoing relationship is just the routine, day-to-day aspects... How do you keep the excitement or spontaneity in the relationship?
5. What kind of things do you two do together? Has that impacted your relationship?

### **Decision-making (Household management financial responsibilities)**

1. Now I want to shift gears a bit & have you tell me about how the two of you make decisions. So for important family matters, how do you make decisions? Can you think of the last big/major decision you made? [If can't think of one – go to financial] Walk me through it? What happens when you disagree?
2. Biggest financial decision – what was it, how'd you decide? Can you think of a time when you've disagreed on a financial decision? (*Why was it a conflict? What did each side think should happen? How long did the conflict last? Mutual agreement? Who caved in/compromised?*) DO the SAME for next few questions!!
3. How about with your kids (if applicable), think of an important decision? (*schooling, activities, manners & responsibilities, gender expectations, religion*) How'd you manage that? Ultimate decision? Time when you disagreed about your children? (Use probes)
4. Overall, do you feel like you share, that things are equal? Where not? (*agree? household financial & parenting extended family, religious, sex, etc*). How do you deal with that?

## **Conflict**

1. What kinds of things do you argue about? How about last argument? (*how did it start; then what; continue past that day (stay in same bed); how did it end*) Angry after? How long to smooth things over after? Is it something you argue about often? Why?
2. Is that how arguments typically go? How'd you figure out (manner of negotiation) works best for you? Certain things/topics you've learned to avoid? How did you figure that out? What about things you do to prevent or get out of an argument?
3. What do you do when you feel hurt? How did you learn to say how you felt?

## **Part III: Overall reflections on marriage**

### **Assessing & reflecting on relationship & crisis management**

1. Many couples say their relationships go thru ups and downs. That true for you? Looking back, what moments stand out as being really hard/down times in your marriage? (*Ever a point when it felt like your relationship was shaky? Ever split up or consider it? Why do you think you stayed together? How did you get through it? Did it push you apart or bring you closer?*) What moments stand out as really good happy times?
2. Crises (health, financial, or family)? How did you handle and work through that? Have finances ever made your relationship difficult, presented challenges?
3. Thinking about your relationship today \_\_\_\_ years since you got together. How has relationship changed? How've you've changed/grown since then? Your spouse?
4. Do you think of him/her as your best friend? Is that necessary? Many couples say trust is important, agree? When did you know this was someone you could trust/depend on?
5. Do you feel like you can tell your partner anything? What kinds of things do you talk about? Hardest thing for you to share/open up about? What enabled you to do that?
6. What role, if any, does your family play in your relationship? Supportive or not? Other places/people you turn to for support?
7. Do you think couples who are black face different issues compared to other couples (challenges, conditions, etc)? Do you think you face any particular issues as a black couple? *If so ... what's most misunderstood/misconception about black couples?*

### **Philosophies of partnership**

1. Are there any couples that have served as guides or role models for you? Why helpful, what do you admire? How about a bad/difficult marriage? What about it seems problematic/you want to avoid? How many couples lasted do you all know?
2. Keeping that in mind, what makes for a good marriage/relationship? (*Good husband/wife; Must haves, must avoid characteristics would or should it have?*)
3. What's been the most important work for you to stay together? How'd you realize that? What helps you to keep doing the work? Does the work change over time? How so?
4. What are you most looking forward to (doing) in the future as the years go on?
5. What do you think young couples don't understand or mistakes they make? What lessons about marriage/relationships have you tried or want to pass on to your children?
6. What do you love most about your spouse or would you miss if they were gone? On the whole, what 3 words would you use to characterize your relationship with spouse?

Anything else you'd like to add ... issues not discussed?

Thank You!

## B. Individual Interview

**Introduction:** Thank you again for volunteering to participate in this study. Offer brief explanation for the aim of this second, individual interview. Re-iterate that information shared in this interview is confidential and will not be shared with anyone, including her/his partner. Ask again for oral confirmation that they have received, read and understood the project information sheet and that I have permission to digitally audio record the interview. Explain structure of the interview.

### **Individual Structure:**

Gain a better understanding of your family background, parents' relationship & other couples that served as role models, as well as values, beliefs & past relationships that influenced how you see what it means to be in a marriage/partnership and came to approach your current relationship.

Explore your individual perspective on the evolution of your current relationship, may also include questions to clarify responses from the previously conducted joint interview. Discuss your perspective on any particular issues/challenges/strengths in African American unions. Other insights, unasked questions

### Part I: **Individual** - family background & previous relationships

1. Tell me a bit about your childhood?
2. Tell me a little bit about your parents and their relationship? What do you most remember about the nature of their relationship? *How did it work/function? How would you describe your mother's role/father's role? Who managed things?*
3. How do you think your parents' relationship impacted your perspective on relationships? Are there things that you learned in that relationship that shaped your relationship with \_\_\_\_ that you wanted to make sure that you didn't do in you all's marriage? (*Parents divorced ... when did that happen?*)
4. You'd seen your mom – what did you think it would be like to be a wife – or what was a wife supposed to be/do?
5. When you were growing up **did** you think you would get married or spend your life with someone? Why or why not?
6. Were there other couples that influenced your view of relationships? What did they show you as a reference for how to stay together?

### **Past relationships**

1. Said you were very certain of who YOU were & what you wanted/needed ... before you met, what were the qualities traits you thought you needed?
2. Any serious relationships before \_\_\_\_? The kind where you thought you might marry? Tell me about these



3. Did religion play any role in your perspective on what you wanted/needed? *Where does God fit in the relationship, if at all?*
4. Said you knew ... but were there any doubts or concerns – about you, him, marriage/relationships more broadly as your relationship progressed?

**Part II: History of the Relationship** (*Probe to extent not mentioned handled in joint interview*)

1. In our interview with (partner) you two told me “your story”. From your own unique perspective is there anything you would add or change in describing how your relationship developed and evolved?
2. At what point did he/she start to feel like your best-friend?
3. Did you do any premarital counseling before you got married? Who planned the wedding how was that experience?
4. Said you felt you were already married before married ... nothing much changed when you got married, no major transition. That feeling of “being married” how was it different from your single life?

**Part III: Interpersonal dynamics**

1. Do you think you had a good understanding of partner early on? What facilitated that understanding? Were there any barriers to you knowing him/her – things that were hard for you to understand?
2. He mentioned, he’s not very open. Did you ever feel that he wasn’t open with you? How did that make you feel? How did you approach him to get him to open or to navigate that closure? Learn how to get him to discuss and engage?
3. *On flip side:* Do you think He/She understood you? And now? How has that changed?
4. Were there any insecurities, anxieties, or fears that **you**’ve had to work through in yourself in order for your relationship to grow? Insecurities – to work on or through with spouse? Hardest thing to accept?
5. What about **your partner’s** –any insecurities/anxieties – they had to work through for the relationship to develop? Things you have to comfort her about? How did you come manage or alleviate those anxieties? How would you describe your problem solving style as compared to your partner’s? When you do get into conflict were your ways of dealing with conflict similar or different? How did you learn how to navigate those differences?

6. Are there any issues of persistent/continuing points of conflict between you & partner?
7. How did you come to take that approach? Is it successful? In your relationship, what have been the greatest strengths and biggest challenges/issues

**Part IV: Race & marriage**

1. Do you think black couples are facing issues that other couples do NOT have to deal with? If so, what? Particular challenges in your relationship as a black man/woman? Ethnic cultural differences within your racial dynamics – different backgrounds?
2. Things that ppl misunderstand about black couples?
3. Also, the question - what lessons about marriage or relationships do you want to pass on to your children? How do you try to convey this to them?

**Part V: Overall relationship & Philosophy of Marriage**

Finally, I'd like to talk to you a little about love and relationships in general. I'm interested in your ideas about what makes relationships and marriage work.

1. What do you think are some of the misconceptions that singles/unmarried people have about marriage? What do you wish someone would have told you before getting married?
2. What beliefs/ideas do you think they need to be disavowed of? What would/could help them have a more accurate/realistic view of marriage? Is it possible to have a full or realistic view of marriage before you enter it?
3. What are the biggest lessons you learned - about marriage, women, being a mother, yourself? Do you think you had the skills when you came into the relationship, how did you get them?
4. Do you consider **PARTNER** to be your BEST friend? Do you turn to your spouse first w/good news? Bad news?
5. What do you treasure/value most about PARTNER or your relationship? What would you miss most if she/he were no longer with you?

Anything else you'd like to add ... issues not discussed?

THANK YOU!!!

### C. Expert Interview

Today is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am conducting one of the expert interviews. Can I have you say your name and let me know if it would be ok for me to record this interview?

Can I have you introduce yourself? [Background, counseling perspective, clientele]

1. What are some of the issues that couples have been coming to you for? In particular, when they arrive here at your door and are seeking counseling, what are they coming here for? [*communication, Infidelity, commitment issues, finances, sex– explain each; gender specific? (e.g. women need to be cherished and men respected)*]
2. So you work with clients from a variety of back grounds, both economically, racially. How much of your clientele would you say are African American when it comes to couples? *The other couples from other backgrounds, are coming from what other backgrounds?*
3. So if a couple shows up for their first kind of session to see you know we don't know if counseling is right for us but we gotta do something, here we are. What's the process, can you walk me through that kind of initial process. Do you work with them together or individually?
4. At what points do you find that couples usually come in to you like are there kind of life moments that bring them there [ having children or children leaving the house, crisis, year in the relationship 5 or 6 year mark that's when they start coming in? Do you notice any kind of pattern of when couples?
5. Most challenging issues for them to work through? What is the thing that maybe presents the greatest amount of walls or barriers that you see needing to be worked through?
6. Who usually leads the charge to come in for counseling [ gender, cheater or cheated on]? Men or women skeptical?

### Counseling Perspective & Approach

1. Describe your counseling perspective – psychotherapy or spiritual – why is this a cornerstone for your practice?
2. There's the spiritual Christian element, can you give me an example of how that might guide how you approach guiding them through their relationships?
3. Other traditions that you work from?

4. What kind of advice, help, resources, clarification, etc. do you give the people who come to you?

### **Communication**

1. What are the issues?
2. Do you find that they know their love languages coming in the door?  
Compatibility in how they express or what they expect from love? How do you help them to understand love languages?
3. Beyond tone and manner in which things are being said, other issues of communication you find that they have problems with? Are there other kinds of ways that communication is breaking down? *women are communicating with men that is becoming a problem and an issue of respect? African Americans women feisty sometimes confrontational.*
4. Why do you think they don't come to that answer that we need to communicate something by themselves

### **Expectations?**

1. Are expectations being communicated when ppl are entering relationships or even as they continue to develop?
2. Why aren't people communicating their expectations? What is that a function of?
3. Beyond putting their best foot forward and perhaps not being real because they are putting their best foot forward, does communication about expectations seem to be something that people take for granted or don't even realize that they should do? Children, sex, care, expressions of love, other?
4. Are their expectations of each other realistic?
5. Example of some of the unrealistic expectations that they bring to the table?  
Difference for women/men?
6. How tied are those expectations to visions that they have of who *they* should be or get to be as a husband or wife? [women wanting to - wanting to be treated maybe like princesses, are there other unrealistic expectations that you find that they bring to relationships? Men?]

### **Family & Gender expectations**

1. To what extent do you see, family background shaping how men or women approach their relationships or fail to approach their relationships?

2. Do you find that the couples who you're dealing with come in w/ traditional values of male leadership and for lack of a better word more submissive women or are they coming in with a mix of values that they are trying to figure out or do they have egalitarian kind of ways of saying like what tends to be the trend that you see?
3. To the extent that there are differences, what/where are these differences coming from? [family, previous relationships, media, etc.]

### **Cultural issues**

1. Mentioned you work w/couples from various backgrounds - Do you find that black couples are facing any particular or distinctive issues? If so what?
2. Do you see any patterns/cultural habits in the community that contribute to problematic gender relations?

### **Age & experience**

1. Do you find that kind of the younger couples or couples who come in with let's say kind of less experience, are they coming to you for different things than the kind of couples who began a relationship after they've had greater life experience and what are those differences? Let's say somebody who gets married at 23 versus somebody who gets married at 33?
2. Okay and so you have a 23 year old couple, what is it that you're helping them walk through, if you can give me an example, think of your work with a younger couple.
3. How about couples who do come in either with more baggage or just more experience let's say they had happy relationships beforehand what are the things that you tend to be walking them through?
4. Our kind of hypothetical older couple, who are negotiating compromise. What are examples of some of the kind of issues that they have to work through and learn in order to compromise? Okay (pause) thinking about our hypothetical older couple one more time (both light laugh) um what are some of the baggage that you see people bringing into their relationship?

### **Values**

1. What are the kind of values that you see African American or black couples bringing to their relationship that shapes what they're doing? Are there other values like in addition to maybe their spirituality that people bring to their relationship to kind of shape what they do?

2. In thinking about black couples as opposed to some of the other couples that you deal with even though black couples are the majority. Are they dealing w different issues than other couples in general?
3. Resources that you guide them to [e.g. authors, five love languages, etc.] How do you use them? Recommended reading, specific exercises?

### **Expert experience**

1. What is the kind of most challenging issue for you to work through as you're working with them? Like what's the kind of greatest challenge for you?
2. How do you define success? Like what makes for a successful outcome. Is it staying together and working through it is it realizing like can there be different versions for what a successful outcome looks like
3. What's the most gratifying part?
4. What's the most surprising part of the thing you do?
5. What you think are the greatest misconception ppl have about black couples/marriage?
6. What are the greatest misconceptions singles have about marriage? Where does that come from?
7. What would you say are the challenges that couples who hope to be successful need to be working on? Black couples in particular?
8. Is there anything that you would like to add you know for people who want to understand about black couples?

Anything else you'd like to add ... issues not discussed?

THANK YOU!!!

### Appendix III: Demographic Questionnaire

Month & Year of birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Hometown: \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female

Marital status: ☐ Married ☐ Cohabiting Years together: \_\_\_\_\_

Time dating before marriage: \_\_\_\_\_

Did you live together before marriage: ☐ Yes ☐ No. If yes, how long \_\_\_\_\_

Previous marriage: ☐ Yes ☐ No.

If yes, how long & reason for dissolution: \_\_\_\_\_

How many children do you have if any? (Children's age & gender – **NO names**)

Education: < High school High school Some College College Degree Advanced degree

Religion: ☐ Muslim ☐ Catholic ☐ Protestant ☐ Jewish ☐ None Other \_\_\_\_\_

Home: ☐ Own ☐ Rent Other \_\_\_\_\_

What is your individual annual income (without spouse)? (please circle one)

Less than 10K	40-49,999K	80-89,999K
10-19,999K	50-59,999K	90-99,999K
20-29,999K	60-69,999K	100- 120K
30-39,999K	70-79,999K	More than 120K

What is your total household income, including all earners in your household? (circle)

Less than 10K	40-49,999K	80-89,999K
10-19,999K	50-59,999K	90-99,999K
20-29,999K	60-69,999K	100- 120K
30-39,999K	70-79,999K	More than 120K

#### Family Background

<b>Father</b>	<b>Mother</b>
Occupation	Occupation
_____	_____
Highest level of education	Highest level of education
_____	_____
Place of birth (Country, state)	Place of birth (Country, state)
_____	_____

Parent's Marital Status:

Never married Cohabiting Married Divorced Separated

If separated or divorced, your age at separation and who you lived with: \_\_\_\_\_

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